

UNDER THE SKIN

Nina Bawden

Under the skin we are all the same. But do we really accept that we are all brothers, members one of another, whatever our clothes, our speech, our table-manners or the colour of our skins? Do we really believe it, or is it just an illusion to comfort our Western middle-class guilt - like our good works and our gifts to charity?

Jay Nholu, a handsome young African, comes to England to spend a year at the London School of Economics and stays with his friends, Tom and Louise Grant. Jay is generous, kind, grateful. Tom and Louise are affectionate, understanding and good-intentioned. The result is disaster

or, as it turns out, disaster just avoided because, in the event, enough people refuse to let their prejudices interfere with their behaviour, prejudices admitted and concealed, shameful and shamefully funny.

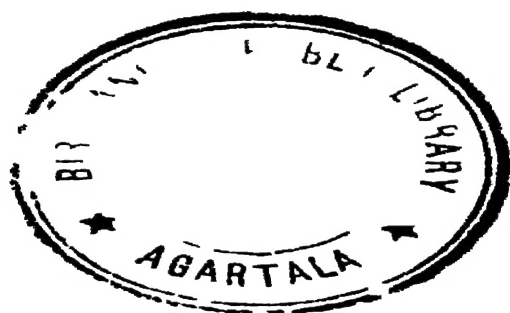
In her new novel Nina Bawden explores with rare insight and subtlety the liberal conventions which have become the fashionable uniform of enlightened twentieth century man. She writes with warmth, humour and sensitivity. *Under the Skin*, compulsively readable, is a perceptive and uncomfortably honest novel

By the same author

WHO CALLS THE TUNE
THE ODD FLAMINGO
CHANGE HERE FOR BABYLON
THE SOLITARY CHILD
DEVIL BY THE SEA
JUST LIKE A LADY
IN HONOUR BOUND
TORTOISE BY CANDLELIGHT

NINA BAWDEN

Under the Skin



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**To Juliet O'Hea
With Love**

I

‘G O O D God,’ I said. ‘He does look black.’

In Africa, under that desultory, bright glare, one simply hadn’t noticed. Here, on this pale October day – light strained through a veil of thin, blue silk – he looked as if he had been dipped into a vat of bitter chocolate or polished with Kiwi Dark Tan for a fancy-dress ball. He was wearing a fawn, light-weight suit cut too long in the jacket, too tight round his neat, high buttocks; a sparkling white shirt, white and beige calf shoes, an emerald satin tie. Coming down the stairs to the customs hall at London Airport, Jason – Jay – Nbola looked as exotically out of place as a peacock in an asphalt yard.

Louise frowned. My wife is a conscientious liberal. She ignores the colour of a man’s skin as resolutely as her grandmother would have ignored a need to go to the lavatory. Louise would have pretended not to notice if Jay had appeared before her stark naked and striped like a zebra. This thought produced in me a faint, deciduous melancholy. I hoped she wouldn’t treat Jay with too much caution, too much awful, patronizing *reverence* – as if he had some killing disease that couldn’t be mentioned.

‘Black as the Ace of Spades,’ I said in a loud, determined voice, collecting several startled looks from the other people waiting behind the sheep-pen barrier and an especially reproachful one from an ancient lady beside Louise. She had one of those nice, papery old faces you sometimes see, lined with gentleness and resignation. I saw, too late, that she had a small Indian girl by the hand. Her expression as she drew

the child away, out of my contaminated vicinity, made me feel like the overseer in Uncle Tom's Cabin.

'Tom, you are an *awful* man,' Louise whispered and dug her nails into my wrist. I winced and she laughed softly. 'He looks nice.'

'He is.' I tucked her hand under my right arm and waved vigorously with my left, trying to attract Jay's attention. He looked less jaunty than I remembered, standing alone in the middle of the hall and showing the whites of his eyes. A new toy, an expensively gleaming camera, dangled before him like a sporran and made him look like a lost child. A spasm of anxiety gripped my stomach; then he saw me and raised his pink-palmed hand in welcome.

I waved back, suddenly full of the curious embarrassment that comes when you have to greet a friend from a distance. (You can't go on waving and grinning like an ape indefinitely, but it seems impolite to stop.) Luckily, before my arm began to ache too unbearably, the rest of the passengers from the charter plane appeared. A small tidal wave of Africans, they surged down the stairs and swept Jay along with them towards the customs benches. A short, bald man rounded them up, yapping at their heels like a fussy sheepdog. A label saying 'British Council' was pinned on his grey jacket. His flock listened with grave politeness while he chattered at them and waved his expressive little hands.

'I hope he remembers to declare that camera,' I said.

'He will. Stop worrying, Tom.' Louise squeezed my arm. 'Old worry-guts.'

We smiled at each other. It was absurd to feel so nervous. Louise said, 'I wish it wasn't so cold. He'll be *frozen*.'

'It's not that hot where he comes from. Sometimes no more

than a damp-ish summer here. As a matter of fact, a lot of the children get bronchitis. The English disease.'

And leprosy and T.B. and malnutrition, I thought. I had seen children at the hospital with bellies swollen like pig's bladders and hair that was no longer black and woolly but thin and red and downy. I hadn't told Louise about them, though. She would have been so sorry, so upset, and I have a horror of pity - it is too easy a way to purge one's guilt. . . .

'Poor little things,' Louise said gravely. Then she added, equally gravely, 'I asked mother to get me a hot water bottle for Jay. All ours have perished.'

'I bet she was delighted,' I said.

*

My mother-in-law grew up in Kenya at a time when gay young sparks from the White Highlands still rode horseback into Nairobi, drunk as lords on Friday nights, and shot out the street lamps one by one. Her opinion of Africans is uninhibited; as it suits her mood they are either lovable children or savages just down from the trees. In recent years the latter viewpoint has prevailed; since Ghana became independent, her chief amusement has been gloomy prophecy. She collects tales of outrage from Africa like stamps or shells.

When Louise announced that Jay was coming to live with us for a year because his Government grant was inadequate to maintain both him in London and his family at home, she was thunderously silent for a while. Then she told us that all Africans smelt and if they didn't smell they stole. If we insisted on behaving so ridiculously would we at least lock up Aunt Harriet's valuable collection of silver porringers given to Louise at her christening? For the past few weeks she

had brimmed over with sage and hospitable advice of this kind.

Louise said, 'I told her Jay's father was a Chief. I thought it might impress her.'

'A Sub-Chief,' I corrected. Even so, it conjured up a slightly misleading picture: a benign character in a gay blanket. Solomon Nbola was a sly, disreputable old man who always wore a long, ancient Army greatcoat, puttees on his bare legs and tinkling brass bells in his ear lobes. A veteran of the first war, he had done little since except distil Nubian gin, beget children, and turn up regular as clockwork every Remembrance Day to stand in the hollow square before the flag while Philip Agnew, the District Commissioner, intoned 'Let Us Now Praise Famous Men.' He didn't really come for the ceremony but for the buns and lemonade that were served afterwards and to air his own peculiar grievance. When I was there, last November, I heard it.

'You too were in the Army' he said to Agnew. 'You know how deeply we suffered. We gave and did not count the cost. But I ask you, sir, is it fair that I should not have my medals? I have never received them. For years I kept silent. In the last war I joined up again. I did an important job - as important in its way as many a great general's - and still I have no medals.'

Jay told me that in the last war his father had made a sizeable amount of money by stealing food from the barracks - his cousin was a cook there - and selling it back to them again. He spoke of his father with an indulgent, amused affection: Jay was not a university graduate but he had had a secondary education and thought of his father, I think, as quaint and left-behind, rather as a second generation American might regard his Polish parents.

When I came home I had a set of miniatures made for the old man -- Burma Star, Victoria Cross, the lot -- and sent them out to him. I hope they gave him pleasure.

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The British Council man ran a prettily manicured finger-nail down the list in his hand. 'Here we are,' he said. 'Mr Jason Nbola. One year course at L.S.E. Will you take him now?'

'What?' I said, startled. 'Yes. If you wrap him up nicely.'

He didn't smile. 'R-right. One thing, though. Just be sure he has *absolutely* all his luggage, will you? Some of them are so careless.'

'No sense of responsibility,' I said. 'Just like children.'

Louise kicked me on the shin. 'Oh, you ——' she began to mutter, and then switched the savage expression with which she often meets my silly jokes to one of enchanting sweetness. Jay had appeared at the barrier. He was laden with bags and dropped them all to hold out his hands to us.

'So this is your beautiful wife,' he said. 'Mrs Grant, I am so very delighted to meet the wife of my dear friend.'

I said, 'Well, Jason, you still praising the Lord?'

He threw back his head and laughed his gurgling, infectious laugh. 'I surely am, Tom. Praise the Lord, you son of a gun.'

People looked at us sidelong. Louise went pink and smiled in a fixed, embarrassed way.

Jay saw her expression and said quickly, 'Mrs Grant, I must confess something. For years I believed that when Europeans greeted people, they always said "Praise the Lord".'

She looked at me blankly. I explained. 'Jay was educated in a mission school. By an evangelical hearty.'

'He was a very good man indeed,' Jay said. 'He was a father to me. But he was sometimes alarming. Once, in the rains, he drove a whole lot of us boys to Nairobi and each time he came to a dangerous corner he took his hands off the wheel to pray to Jesus. It worried us very much.'

He spoke gravely, though his eyes were dancing. It is terribly difficult to take the right attitude towards people who have helped you and whom you have outgrown. Jay managed, without apparent effort, to strike just the right note not mockery, but amused, respectful affection. I felt again the full, sweet force of his charm. I smiled at Louise in the fatuous way of a parent who wants his child to be appreciated and was delighted to see her smiling too. Of course she was bound to like him not just because she was disposed to like all black men this was a tendency I despised but because he was Jay.

'It must have done,' she said. 'I

She stopped. A man was standing beside Jay. Although Jay was tall, he had to look up to him. He said, a trifle reluctantly, I thought, 'Mrs Grant, Tom I would like you to meet my friend, Mr Okapi. Mr Thomas Okapi from Uganda.'

He had a wide, wide smile. His teeth were white, regular and large, like new tombstones.

'Any friend of Mr Nbola's is a friend of mine,' he promised, engulfing my hand in his. His voice was rolling and sonorous, like a preacher's. He switched the headlight beam of his smile onto Louise. 'Mr Nbola is fortunate to have English friends, Mrs Grant. Not to be alone in a strange country - ah, that is good fortune indeed. Most of us are not so lucky, we have to plough our own furrow.'

'Mr Okapi is a law student,' Jay said. 'He has studied two years at Makerere. We have met on the plane.'

'We are comrades in a great adventure,' Okapi said. 'We are come to complete our studies and widen our view of life.'

'You're going to London University?' Louise asked in an intelligent voice.

'I am indeed. But it is not only law I shall study. I shall strive with all my heart to understand your way of life. I hope to make a great many friends, through the university and through my church.'

'I'm sure you will,' Louise said. There was a pause. 'Have you somewhere to stay?'

He shook his great head sorrowfully. 'The British Council have arranged for me to stay at Capricorn House. But this is only a temporary measure for me. With God's help I shall soon find suitable lodgings with a charming English family, like the lucky Mr Nbola. Indeed, you might be pleased to assist me, Mrs Grant? You must have a wide circle of friends.'

'Perhaps we might be able to think of someone.' She shot me a nervous look, and he saw it.

'I'm sure you will do your best,' he said.

Louise stiffened, chilled by the calm assurance in his voice, the fixed, fat smile; not noticing the sweat on his broad forehead or his eyes, which were humble like a dog's.

'If we think of something, we'll let you know,' she said and looked relieved as he glanced at his gold watch.

'I am afraid I must deprive you of my company now. We are to be taken into the city on the airport bus.'

Louise said, ashamed - she was always ashamed when she disliked people - 'Perhaps we could drive you in. . . .'

I said firmly, 'We don't go in the right direction. The bus will be quicker, anyway.'

There was nothing to dislike in Mr Okapi, he was only

tedious, but I was glad to see him go. Even the ostentation of his gold watch, his extremely expensive suit, was pathetic : if he had stayed any longer I might have felt it my duty to feel responsible for him. Perhaps it was my duty. Perhaps, in a sense, I was responsible for every black face on that charter plane, but I didn't feel it. I only felt responsible for Jav, who was my friend.

*

Slightly to my annoyance, Louise insisted we should go to the restaurant for coffee. (I hate public eating places above the level of those cheap cafés that simply cater for the body's need : there is something so gross about those enormous menus, the fat men with jaded palates, the pointless, unnecessary greed.)

We ordered coffee and buttered toast, watched a plane take off outside the window, and talked a little. Jay was rather silent until the coffee came, when he said suddenly, 'Tom, I have something to tell you.'

He was looking nervous and my heart sank — had he decided that he did not want to stay with us after all, but in London ? That it would be more fun to live with a crowd of students, pigging it in loathsome digs, somewhere jollier and more central than our house in Putney ?

But it wasn't that. He said, 'Tom, Philip is arriving in three days time.'

For a moment I couldn't think who Philip was. 'Philip?' I repeated stupidly.

'My eldest son,' he said, not reproachfully, and to Louise, 'I named him Philip because he was born in Coronation Year. After your Prince.'

I couldn't look at Louise. I felt a sudden wild fury. What

did Jay expect? That Louise would look after his boy? Then my anger ebbed and I felt embarrassed and ashamed. If he did expect us to take Philip, what of it? By African standards, most Europeans are grossly inhospitable. If I had arrived in Jay's town with six children, he would cheerfully have cared for them for months.

Apparently he had not expected so much of us. 'My uncle has offered to send Philip to school. He had intended a boarding school in Mombasa but it is not so much more expensive in England, except for the fare. And, since you are being so good to me, I can pay for that out of my grant.' He beamed happily.

'I thought the grant was only just adequate to support Agnes and the children after you'd taken your allowance for pocket-money?'

He looked at me. 'Agnes has taken a job as a school-teacher.'

Louise said, 'Have you chosen a school for your little boy?'

'Yes. My uncle is headmaster of a secondary school near Kisumu. He has a friend, a professor at Makerere, who has suggested this school in Surrey. Philip can go there almost as soon as he arrives, but perhaps he can stay one or two days with you if it is convenient.' He won't disturb you, he is a good boy.' He smiled at me sweetly, not to placate me but as if he had no idea I might need placating. 'Philip is looking forward to seeing his Uncle Tom.'

I smiled back, hypocritically. I couldn't remember what Philip looked like. Jay had three boys — or was it four?

Louise said, 'We'll be delighted to have him, Jay.'

Her tone was emphatically genuine but a sly, give-away smile twitched the corners of her mouth. She was fond of children but she was 'delighted' to have Philip chiefly because

she knew it would annoy her mother. (Louise is fond of her mother, but there are too many prejudices they don't share. Not that they quarrel, exactly; it is more a matter of trampling over old battlefields together, a process they both seem to enjoy.)

'It is very kind of you,' Jay said. 'I was worried. I did not want to seem as if I was imposing on you.'

'Don't be absurd,' I said. 'Though I did not want Philip, I was hurt because Jay had thought that I might not. I was not usually ashamed of my real feelings; in fact I had always prided myself on being honest about them. I had thought of myself as a dry, cautious, rather cynical man, the kind of man who never lets himself go and takes what other people may say with a pinch of salt - and been not displeased with the image. But since I had met Jay I had begun to wish I was someone quite different; someone more eager, more warm-hearted, more *simple*. All the old springs of conduct seemed rusty and worn-out and I wanted to replace them. My mind was cluttered up with centuries of other people's opinions, rather like a dusty attic crammed with old furniture: I had a spring-cleaning urge to chuck them all out, sweep the place bare. It wasn't possible, of course, it never is. You can't recover innocence by taking thought. . . .

Jay said, 'A great many Africans do impose on their English friends, Tom.' He laughed suddenly, his hand in front of his mouth. 'They trade on their sense of guilt.'

I laughed. Everything was suddenly open and easy between us. We went out to the car; Louise drove, as she liked to do, and Jay got into the back, beside me.

He said, 'Are we going to your home in Putney now? Can we drive past Buckingham Palace?'

'I'm afraid the Palace is a bit out of our way.'

His face fell, but he said politely, 'Never mind. Perhaps we can go to the Palace tomorrow. Is the Queen in residence now?'

I had forgotten his obsession with the Royal Family. 'I'm afraid I don't know,' I said.

'We can look in the Court Circular tomorrow,' Louise said, and smiled at me in the driving mirror.

Jay leaned forward, looking out of the window. His hands, very narrow-boned and delicate, rested on his thin, pointed knees. His protuberant lower jaw jutted against the fading light outside the car, his lips full, curved, and slightly blue in colour, his small ear lying flat against his head like a neat shell. Just behind it there was a scar where he had had a mastoid removed, a short, thick scar almost like a strip of leather grafted onto the flesh: it is a peculiarity of African skin that it sometimes heals like this. Otherwise his face and strong, graceful throat were without blemish. He had never had smallpox and his skin was smooth with a matt sheen like a dark rose petal: in different lights it shone with coppery glints or blue like a blackbird's wing. In repose, he was a good-looking, healthy young man; talking or laughing, a delightfully handsome one. He turned to me now, smiling, his full, brown eyes liquid with emotion.

'Tom,' he said, 'this is the most wonderful moment of my life. For years it has been my dream to come to England. I cannot believe I am not dreaming now.'

He spoke from his heart and I felt the prick of envy: it was something I had forgotten how to do. But I wished his wonderful moment had come to him in some more attractive place. Louise had turned off the main London road to avoid the rush-hour traffic and we were driving through a sad little street of shabby terrace houses, past a small general shop

with a dusty display of ice-cream cartons in the window, and a depressed looking pub. (Actually, it was the kind of street that has always made me nostalgic : it is as if the cosy seediness, the gentle, rainy squalor – seen to perfect effect on a damp, declining afternoon – is a reminder of something lost. Even the smell of those streets, frying chips, dried dog dirt, the pervasive smell of leaves burning somewhere in a municipal park, is exciting, a memory you cannot quite run to earth. A memory of innocence perhaps, of a time further back; an adolescent trailing his first girl, a child running home after school to certain love, warmth and tea.)

It struck me that Jay could hardly appreciate the evocative quality of this depressed, urban area. There was something both ridiculous and moving therefore in the way he turned his head from side to side like a boy on an adventurous journey. What tales he would have to tell when he got back to school ! We passed a line of cheap shops, a brightly lit Tube station. He craned his neck to look at it with awe, as if it were a cathedral.

I said, 'This is all rather slummy. London is a hideously overgrown place. Tomorrow I'll take you round and show you the sights.'

'The Baden-Powell Institute and the Planetarium? I am very anxious to see the Planetarium.'

'Anything you like.'

'Oh, Tom, that is *good* of you.'

His inflections, somewhat genteel and old-fashioned, were copied from Chirk, in whose bungalow we had met. His joy was all his own, a joy which seemed only restrained from breaking out into wild laughter and a noisy stream of talk by acquired dignity and instinctive politeness : he was with white people and white people are never noisy except when

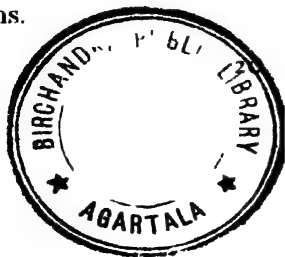
fighting or drunk. But he was stiff, almost shivering with his joy in everything about him; the lit, wet streets, the traffic jams, the bright shops, the prospect of visiting the Planetarium. His eyes were luminous, his voice quivered. 'Tom, I am so very, very happy. My heart is full. I cannot believe that I am here at last, with you, in your own country. In the Land of the King's Cows.'

The words came out in an exuberant shout. I glanced nervously at the back of Louise's head. Was there a chance she hadn't heard? Of course there wasn't. We had stopped at a traffic-light and she turned round. Her small, triangular face, like a pretty cat's, was pink with amusement. 'Tom,' she said, 'what an old ass you are.'

I AM always embarrassed when Louise catches me out – reading A. E. Housman, for example, or weeping in the cinema. I am a rational man but one's unconscious is stubbornly sentimental. I suppose there has to be some refuge for the deeply felt emotions, the romantic dreams that seem so comic as you grow older.

I was born at Whitstable in the county of Kent. The Land of the King's Cows is some miles out of the town, along the coast. It is an area of flat farmland intersected like a chequer-board with reedy dykes, bounded on the west by the arterial road and on the east by a narrow estuary, a foreshore of white broken shells and a long, curving sea-wall. I discovered it on my ninth birthday when my mother gave me a small green book entitled *Rambles With Nature in the Isle of Thanet*.

My mother and I were very close. She was the widow of a bank clerk who died of Bright's Disease a month before I was born. She had been devoted to her husband and my birth, so her friends said, saved her reason. She always spoke to me of 'my husband', never 'your father'; perhaps, as she was an extremely prudish woman, she felt 'your father' was too outspoken. So I grew up, not only without a father, but with the feeling that I had never had one. I never missed him. We lived in a small bungalow that had belonged to my mother's father and I went to school in Canterbury. We were very happy. I can think of only two things that ever made me miserable: my mother's refusal to buy me a bicycle, in case I was killed on the roads, and her belief in the importance of examinations.



About once a week she told me that she was giving me a good start but that I must never forget I would have to make my own way in the world. Making my way depended on examinations; the grammar-school scholarship at eleven, school certificate, the university entrance. Looking back, these were the landmarks of my childhood.

I suppose I might have had worse. Though I wasn't a stupid child, I wasn't brilliant and I was naturally lazy. It was my mother's ambition that kept me in the stream of clever boys – her ambition coupled with a sort of insidious blackmail from her friends. These were mostly middle-aged women, spinsters or widows, devoted to my mother, who would whisper advice to me while she cut sandwiches in the kitchen. 'You're all she's got you know, you mustn't let her down.' The hissed, female exhortations didn't cloud my life but they narrowed it down; I always had the feeling that I was not doing as well as I ought to have done.

All the same, I was happy. I enjoyed my mother's comfortable pleasures. Tea in front of the fire in winter, in the rickety, south-facing veranda in summer; tea once a week in Canterbury when she came in to do a 'little shopping' and meet me from school; tea on the shingle beach on fine summer days. We never went far afield, but once I could safely cross a road and had promised not to talk to strange men – she never said why – I was free to go where I liked, once my homework was done.

After I had read *Rambles With Nature*, my favourite place was the Land of the King's Cows. It was a lonely place, I liked to be alone and the name excited me – it changed a dullish stretch of coastline into an opulent, golden country, full of romantic possibilities. Even the cattle that grazed there were transformed; they were fat, lush cattle, the King's Beasts,

and I was their custodian. My mother was scornful of imagination except when it could be channelled into something positively useful like doing well in the Essay Paper, so all the imaginative games I ever played were set, out of her sight, among the hissing reeds of the dykes, on the white shell beach or in the stinking mud of the estuary when the tide was out. I imagine I only went there on good days because it was a long walk, but it seemed to me afterwards that it was always summer there, the sky was always high and blue, the sun always hot, and the air was different from ordinary air; you drank it in with great, boisterous gulps like an eager novice swigging champagne.

I took Louise there when we were first engaged because I remembered that it was usually deserted and I hoped to make love to her on the cropped grass behind the sheltering sea-wall. She lived with her mother and I lived with my mother, so our opportunities had been limited. The day was fine and Louise perfectly willing, but whenever we sat down and I began preparatory endearments, we discovered a cache of broken glass. It was as if some madman - or two madmen, an alcoholic and a patent medicine addict - had been having a field day, rampaging up and down those two miles of empty coast, sowing broken bottles like dragon's teeth. We found beer bottles, lemonade bottles, gin bottles, whisky bottles, a magnum of champagne and numerous bottles of proprietary laxatives. After Louise had cut her wrist on a bottle of California Syrup of Figs that lay hidden in the grass, she became slightly hysterical. She said it was a terrible place, she was sure she could smell sewage and she couldn't imagine why I had brought her here. By this time, the purpose of the exercise had become obscure to me too. We walked moodily home to find my poor mother extremely put out. She had pre-

pared tea for us an hour earlier and the fish-paste sandwiches, though she had wrapped them in a damp napkin, were getting stale.

I realized on that dreary walk home that I had not really taken Louise there to make love to her, but for sentiment's sake; I had envisaged sitting there in that happy, golden place and having a good talk about myself or about the person I would like to be. I felt a glum relief that I had not made such a fool of myself. She might have laughed at me.

The incident confirmed my belief that any sincere emotion any dream – was sometimes shameful and always funny.

We never had that good talk – though Louise would never have laughed – and I never took her to the Land of the King's Clowns again. I didn't want to, really; I had smelt the sewage too. I don't think I had consciously thought about the place again, let alone spoken about it to anyone until I talked to Jav, one night when I was sufficiently loosened-up by gin.

Though it wasn't the gin entirely. The loosening-up was a process that began the moment I arrived in Africa, the moment in the plane when I first saw the top of Kilimanjaro jutting above the long, ridged, icing-sugar clouds, and the patches of green in the yellow land below, puddled with bright water. I had a sudden sense of relaxation, of freedom – that marvellous holiday feeling of being away from everyone who knows you. (Particularly the ones who love you and know you too well. Away from *them* you can be someone quite different, try out new opinions without someone raising an eyebrow to remind you that this was not what you thought before.)

Not that I had wanted to get away from Louise. When the trip was first mooted – I had been taken on as a temporary consultant by the F.A.O. to advise on a Fisheries Project – we had hoped she would be able to come too. I had tried to raise an additional mortgage on the house but it was a time when credit was tight and Louise's mother, who could easily have lent – or given – the cost of the fare and not missed it, said the heat and the travelling would be too much for Louise's heart.

The prospect of separation grieved us both. We had been married for twelve years, (during which time we had tried, and failed, to have a baby, bought a suburban house and furnished it with Louise's mother's furniture) and never been parted. We had been happy, shared jokes and friends, and still made love with pleasure when Louise was not, as she had often been recently, 'too tired'. We were, I suppose, what would be called a well-integrated couple, though Louise occasionally reproached me for a few cranky ideas – such as hating smart restaurants, over-fed people, women dressed in mink – but never reproached me very much because she liked men who were eccentric, in moderation. I was moderate in all things, we both were.

We were both a little smug.

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It was raining when I arrived in Africa; it was raining for the three days I was in Nairobi and it was still raining when I drove out of it, north towards Lake Victoria.

The car and driver had been lent me out of some Government pool. The car was a long, grey Mercedes; the driver a contemptuous, elderly Kikuyu with a face like a smooth, black

shield and thick, curling lips that showed blood-pink on their inner surfaces. He was contemptuous of the Masai who were starving because of the floods - the Masai were thieves, cattle-stealers, good-for-nothings. 'They should cultivate their shambas', he snarled biblically. He was contemptuous of the Europeans for instituting a relief campaign and of the Africans for not subscribing to it. He even drove his car with a kind of cold, skilled contempt in a series of alarming skids on the laterite roads: to an onlooker, it must have looked like a hippo waltzing. He was a disputatious, disagreeable, mean old man; also he had a bad stomach and the car was filled with his sour, cabbagey smell.

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Philip Agnew said, pitying, 'I see they've given you Livingstone. They usually do. I suppose they like a chance to get him out of their hair in Nairobi, but it seems a tough introduction to Africa.'

'He does seem a bit of a character,' I admitted defensively.

During the long drive I had had the happy feeling that everything was designed expressly to give me pleasure; the wart-hog, trotting through the bush, tail uplifted like a little flag; the flat thorn trees, stiff and grey, the old woman at the side of the road with a go-ged skin and cut ear lobes looped over the tops of her ears. It was a feeling I had not had since I was a small boy playing in the Land of the King's Cows and I was honoured by it: I did not want to dislike anyone.

'He's a foul old man,' Agnew said cheerfully. 'They've been trying to get him out of Government service for years. But they can't. They can't catch him out in anything. He

doesn't steal. He doesn't drink. Doesn't even use the car for his own private purposes.'

He sighed and fingered a wart low down on his cheek. He was a plump, wrinkled man, pale as flour. He had a crumpled face and a sagging belly. His eyes were blue, bright and alert like the eyes of a strong, high-spirited boy and the sagging belly looked as if it would feel solid and tense, like a bag of muscle. He kept himself fit by playing squash before breakfast, a round of golf afterwards, and squash again before dinner in the evening. The golf-course I had seen as we drove up to the bungalow; a miniature copy of any green, well-tended playground in sub-rural Surrey. (Agnew came from Virginia Water.) But golf didn't tone you up like squash, he said, crashing his pale, plump hand into the middle of his stomach as if he were banging a gong. I half-expected it to give off a sullen, ringing sound.

'We had to build a new court-house the year I came here, so I designed it in the shape of a squash court. All you have to do is to move out the benches and paraphernalia in the evening. Very successful, really.' He grinned. 'Always make the fullest use of limited resources. That's something you learn. Matter of fact I've done the same thing in each district I've been posted to when I could' must have built a dozen or more squash courts in my time.'

'It seems an individual contribution to colonial rule.'

He said, with pride, 'I daresay they'll still be standing long after we're gone and forgotten. That won't be long now, I daresay, and I don't suppose there'll be much left after a year or so. The golf-course won't last, that's certain. They'll let it go to rack and ruin in a few months.'

He sighed, this time deeply. The thought pained him. 'Do you play?' he asked.

'I'm afraid not.'

He looked at me with faint reproach. 'Well - at least I can get you a drink.'

*

Perhaps I have made him sound a fool. He wasn't. He was intelligent and benign; within his paternal limits, a good administrator. He was also a good host and adviser. Though he seemed to know very little about the work of the Fisheries Station on the lake, he asked intelligent questions and listened attentively to the answers. He arranged for Livingstone to be occasionally 'relieved' as he tactfully put it and lent me his own driver, a cheerful young Kisii with eyes as big as teacups. With Agnew's help I got through the work in two-thirds of the time I had expected. Perhaps this was largely self-interest on his part, to speed the parting guest; it couldn't be much fun putting up visiting firemen when they couldn't even give you a good round of golf.

Not that he ever showed boredom. He was very decent to me - writing about him I find it hard not to use his vocabulary - and I liked him very much. He was a very likeable man. He had come to Africa at a time when young district officers were dropped off with their bicycles on Monday mornings and collected again on Friday afternoons by the commissioner: he said things were better then. He knew a great deal about Africa and loved it without the usual exile's irritability; if he was depressed by the knowledge that life there as he knew it was coming to end, he had his own avenues of escape. He loved birds and had made a study of the Lanner Falcon; he also knew how to make and use nose flutes. He made four or five a day out of old cigar cases, experimenting with the placing of the holes; sometimes, when

I woke in the night, I heard him playing – an eerie, mournful, weeping sound like the crying of some strange bird.

I enjoyed living with him. All the same, when I came back to his bungalow in the evening I had the feeling that I was returning, not to a township in Africa, but to the Surrey suburb that his golf and his squash and his mild eccentricities had created around him. The town itself, with its single street, its open sewers, the decaying front of the Good Luck Soda Bar, was neither English nor African. In spite of the Indian dukkas and the old men working Singer sewing-machines among the bales of bright, cheap cloth, it had the flimsy look of a film set depicting some American frontier town before the railways came. But the Administration buildings, set among the pale mauve of jacaranda trees and the comfortable Government bungalows surrounding the golf-course, carved out of Africa a tamed, rural landscape as gently, greenly English as Kent. When we sat on the veranda drinking pink gins before dinner, the frogs, bubbling away like demented prophets in the wilderness, seemed only a sound effect suggesting Africa; like the recording of seagulls used on the radio to set a desert island scene.

*

At the club, after dinner, this feeling was enhanced; if it had not been for the bar at one end of the long, rectangular room and the African in a white robe behind it, we might have been in any country church hall, waiting for the vicar to arrive and the social to begin. Upright, institution chairs forlornly lined the walls; in one corner there was a dusty piano and high up near the ceilings clung tattered fragments of coloured paper, the remains of last year's Christmas festivities. I think we went to the club for my benefit: Agnew was

neither a drinking nor a social man. We usually sat at a table, alone under a bleak light. We could look at each other or at the row of broad, khaki backs at the bar. I don't think Agnew was actually unpopular but his natural reserve and his age isolated him; occasionally a man would sit down to drink at our table but he always got up as soon as he decently could with the evident relief of a boy escaping from the head-master's study.

Those evenings the men drinking at the bar, their wives gossiping near the piano - produced in me a kind of watered down sadness. It depressed me to see leisure so tamely used. I was restless and full of energy; I found myself fretting like a boy at some dull, grown-up occasion.

I said to Agnew, 'Do Africans come here?'

'Sometimes. But as guests only. This is a monoracial club. Queer term, isn't it.'

'Is it supposed to be less offensive than Whites Only?'

Agnew shifted his plump bottom on his chair. 'Perhaps. I suppose it must seem stupid to visitors. I mean, in this country, at this time. But the other thing's not easy, you know. We had a multi-racial club in my last district and it wasn't a success.' He laughed suddenly. 'One of our members was the African matron from a big local hospital - a splendid woman, full of guts and intelligence. But all her education, all her training, had been in medicine, d'you see, so her vocabulary was very medical. She played a jolly good hand of bridge but when nature called she'd stand up and say, "Excuse me, I must urinate". It upset the ladies.' He looked at me. 'Seriously though, it is difficult. Who do you let in, who do you keep out? I mean - Government servants are one thing, Africans actually in the Administration and some of the Indians, perhaps, but once you let *them* in, the undesirables turn up too.'

'That's always the excuse, isn't it?' I wasn't, really, very interested. It seemed stupid, but otherwise unimportant.

'I suppose so,' Agnew said. 'As a matter of fact, I did suggest some kind of limited membership for Africans at the last general meeting – we'd had a directive from On High – but there was too much feeling here. Small communities are very obsessional, especially when they're fairly isolated, as we are here. There's a lot of resentment at the moment – a lot of people who'd expected to live their lives out here feel the Government's let them down. It makes them exaggerate their feelings against Africans – they're the chaps who are going to take their jobs away from them. So we have to go very carefully. It's like . . .' he waved his hand in a vague, worried gesture ' . . . like living in a firework factory. One spark and the whole boiling goes up.' He looked at me half resentfully. 'You'd understand if you lived here.'

'Possibly.' I smiled, to show I was not annoyed by this corny remark. 'But doesn't it make it rather difficult for people to meet Africans? Socially, I mean. Some people must want to.'

'You do?' He regarded me narrowly; it wasn't difficult to guess what he was thinking. I was a liberal, a do-gooder, a nigger lover, probably even addicted to some nasty sexual practice.

I said flippantly, 'I'm just a tourist who wants to hobnob with the natives.' He frowned – that hadn't gone down very well – so I added quickly, 'I'm only here for a couple of months. I just want to learn as much as I can, outside my job too, and that includes meeting as many people as I can. Black *and* white.'

Though true, this was embarrassing to say. I smiled, bright-eyed and enthusiastic, the keen student, though inwardly I

felt annoyed – why should I have to *act*. I didn't have any special feelings one way or the other. I was quite prepared to concede that some Africans could be as loathsome as some Englishmen. The trouble with men like Agnew, I thought pettishly, was that they pushed you into taking up an extreme position. You had to be pro or anti; they wouldn't allow you to be neutral.

'Oh,' Agnew said. 'There shouldn't be any difficulty about that. This isn't South Africa, you know.' He smiled in a relieved, fatherly way. 'We've got one charming chap, a young doctor. He studied in Chicago. If you like, I'll get my wife to ask him to dinner.'

'I wouldn't want to bother your wife.'

'Hmm. Perhaps not. Well then, let's see. There's Chirk. He's one of our D.O.'s. He's – he's got a fairly wide circle of friends.'

He looked round hopefully as if Chirk might spring out of the ground, like a genie. A man left the bar and wandered over to our table, glass in hand.

'Can I get you anything, sir?' he said.

He was tall, well-set up with a young, smooth face and smooth, brown eyes that had a liquid, expansive air. He wore short khaki trousers and his legs were plump and white and very hairy.

'No, thank you, Prout,' Agnew said. 'Do you know Mr Grant?'

'Pleased to meet you,' Prout said, and sounded it. 'You're the fisheries man, aren't you? We must have a pow-wow sometime. We've got a few small ponds round here, though they're pretty stinking examples, I'm afraid. No better than swamps – breeding grounds for malaria.'

'What are they stocked with? One of the tilapias?

Tilapia will often keep the mosquitoes down – they eat the algae.'

He shrugged. 'I wouldn't know. Nor would their owners. Far as they're concerned they're just holes in the ground with fish in them.'

'I expect they ought to be drained.'

'I'll say. But can you get anyone to do it? You talk till you're blue in the face and all you get is grins. Passive resistance isn't in it. No sirree. Besides, pond management's too technical.'

'So is any kind of farming. You have to keep up the propaganda. They've done it quite successfully in Uganda. It's worth it if you need more animal protein.'

'I suppose so. What are you up to, down at the station?'

'Investigating a project for introducing two particular fish into African fresh waters. The black carp and the grass carp – the black's a mollusc eater, it should help to control bilharzia.' I added some simple details and he listened, nodding from time to time like a good pupil.

'Well,' he said finally. 'You're the expert.' He smiled, he had an engaging, friendly smile. 'I'll pick your brains before you go, if you don't mind. Not now, though. Pleasure before business. Work is the ruin of the drinking classes.'

Agnew said, 'Is Chirk around? I rather wanted to introduce him.'

Prout's smile vanished. He swallowed his beer and said, 'He doesn't come to the club. Doesn't care for his countrymen. Doesn't like the colour of our skins.' He looked at me carefully and added, in case I'd missed the point, 'He's a nigger lover. I daresay he's at home – bloody place crawling with niggers as usual.'

'Lay off, Prout,' Agnew said.

'Sorry, sir,' Prout said cheerfully. He winked at me, a large, good-natured wink, and walked back to the bar.

Agnew said, 'He's in for a tough time. He's been in the service ten years but he was locally recruited as an agricultural officer – he came out originally to work for a tea firm. So when independence comes he won't get a pension. Not exactly a jolly prospect.'

He looked ruffled, an old hen fighting for her chicks. I said gently, 'He doesn't seem anxious to improve it.'

'If that's his attitude to Africans, d'you mean? Well – as far as that goes – I just don't know. I doubt if Chirk has any better chance of employment under an independent government, and you'll see what *he's* like. If you really want to, that is. He's an evangelist – Primitive Methodist or something.' He smiled apologetically. 'To tell you the truth, he does get under people's skins.'

'I'd like to meet him all the same,' I said

3

CHIRK's bungalow was bleak in a bachelor way: the cushions sagged in the Government chairs and the oil lamps were turned up too high, so that your eyes smarted. An expensive-looking gramophone was playing Beethoven's Ninth. Refreshments were laid out on a deal table: ginger biscuits, milk and orange juice in tall jugs.

'The juice is home-made,' Chirk said. 'I buy oranges in crates and my cook makes it fresh every morning. Essential to get your vitamins in this climate. I must apologize for not offering you beer. I'm not actually against alcohol – in fact I used to quite enjoy an occasional glass of sherry – but I gave it up because I felt it corrupted my African friends. Most of them are decent young Christians.'

'Oh,' I said, feeling very old and pagan. Actually, Chirk must have been about thirty-five – my age – though he looked younger than I did, perhaps because of all that orange juice. He was very tall, with long, quick-striding legs that seemed to be fastened to his body somewhere in the region of his chest, giving him the appearance of an athletic pair of scissors. He had fair, limp hair and clear eyes set in the keen face of a scoutmaster. He watched me intently while I sipped at my juice. It was bitter. 'Very nice,' I said.

'Good. Now you must meet some of the chaps.' He bent towards me confidentially. 'I can't tell you how glad I am you've come. It's so good for them to meet a white man who's on *their* side, who isn't prejudiced, who's ready to shake them by the hand and talk to them, man to man.'

This speech depressed me. 'I'm not on any side,' I said weakly.

He nodded understandingly, looking deep into my eyes. 'If you lived here, you'd have to be,' he said solemnly. He took my arm just above the elbow; I felt the grip of his fingers, like warm sausages, through the thin stuff of my coat.

There were eleven or twelve Africans in the room, standing in small groups, still and shy, with glasses of non-alcoholic refreshment in their hands. The atmosphere was not gay. Chirk's voice was the loudest of the party.

'This is Tom, a new friend from England. Tom this is Stephen James Absalom. . . .' We smiled and clasped hands with meaningful heartiness, like masons making the secret sign. 'Tom, this is your namesake, Thomas,' Chirk said. He gave a whinnying laugh. 'Doubting Thomas we used to call him but he is now strong for the Lord. Aren't you, Thomas?'

Thomas was a tiny man. His smile had a wizened, monkeyish melancholy. His hand felt like a chicken's claw. He said sadly, 'The Lord has done a lot for me, Mr. Chirk.'

'My name is Ralph,' Chirk chided him gently. Thomas smiled his sad smile and blinked, as if to hold back tears.

'Mr. Ralph is very good to us all,' he said. 'He is very gentlemanly. I hope you are having an interesting stay in our country.'

They all hoped I was having an interesting stay; I assured them that I was, after that, conversation died. We smiled with the determined brightness of people who are meeting each other for no other reason than meeting each other. Looking at all those beautiful, white teeth, I remembered that smiling is a sign of fear -- or hate. Chirk trundled me round the room. Strong, as he would put it, for the brotherhood of

man, brimming over with the love of God, he reminded me of a gracious dowager at a servant's ball.

He introduced me to two girls, both school-teachers, one plain, one pretty – the age-old combination. The plain one – whose name I instantly forgot – looked at us with that wooden expression which hides an agonized watchfulness and apprehension. The pretty one, Milly, giggled, covering her mouth with her hand. She had a lovely, oval face, firm, cone-shaped breasts, a narrow waist and swelling hips. When she went to the table to set down her empty glass she moved with a beautiful rolling gait. Her legs were long, more slender than a white woman's, and ended in tapering feet that looked too small for her height; she was five foot eight or nine.

'Milly is a school-teacher,' Chirk said. 'She's just come here from Embu. She's working hard on a correspondence course and hoping to get into university next year.' He gave her shoulder an encouraging pat and moved away to hand round the ginger biscuits. His boisterous laugh rang out, high and lonely as a trumpet call on the eve of battle.

Milly looked after him. Her expression was thoughtful but it was impossible to tell what she was thinking. She smiled at me; her teeth were polished and pearly as a baby girl's.

She said, 'Does Mr Chirk have dance records? I like to dance.'

'I don't know.' Though I was sure I knew the answer – dancing was surely corrupting, like drink? I followed her to the gramophone. The young man standing there moved aside to allow us to shuffle through the discs; he watched us with a stern, distant air, not disapproving but disengaged, like an adult watching children play.

'Mr Chirk only has classical music,' he said politely when Milly's complaining gurgles had made the object of our

search plain to him. He looked at me. 'I must introduce myself. I am Jason Nbola.' His expression was friendly but aloof. This aloofness attracted me as did his whole appearance; his unusually narrow, rather intellectual face, the dark, conker-brown eyes, his throat, rising from his cream-coloured shirt like a column of polished wood. I watched him while I apologized to Milly. 'I'm afraid I'm a rotten dancer, anyway. It wouldn't have been much fun for you.'

I felt regretful. I do not enjoy doing things badly but I wouldn't have minded dancing badly with Milly. Though perhaps neither of us would have enjoyed it under Chirk's inhibiting eye.

'I could have taught you the Twist,' Milly said. 'When I was in Nairobi last year a friend of mine took me to the Equator Club. I learned the Twist there, also the Madison.'

Jason Nbola said gravely, 'I should not tell Mr Chirk that. He will think you keep bad company.'

Milly laughed, like a brook rippling. 'Sometimes I like bad company.'

She rolled her eyes at me flirtatiously. I felt a little more at ease. Chirk's terrible, patronizing *bonhomie* – all the worse, somehow, because it wasn't intended to be patronizing but was so sincerely, so honourably meant – and my own frightful presumption in wanting to 'meet Africans', like someone visiting a zoo, suddenly seemed quite unimportant because she was unaware of it. Or appeared to be unaware of it.

Chirk came up then and put an arm round Jason's shoulders. It meant nothing, except that he was one of those lonely men who are always touching people to decrease their loneliness. He boomed thinly in his high, unsexed voice, 'I see you've met my very good friend, Jason. I think you'll find him interesting to talk to. He's a Community Development

Officer – a most interesting, worth-while job.’ He beamed on us impartially, his open-air skin rosy and sweating. ‘Perhaps you might like him to show you one of the Youth Centres. They’re all run on the Self-Help principle. I think you might find them very interesting indeed.’

Jason did not respond to – indeed, seemed not to notice – Chirk’s embrace. There was no sign of either resentment or pleasure in his calm, young face; he simply stayed within the circle of the man’s arms and smiled gently, a smile in which you could read nothing at all. I realized that as with Milly I had no idea what he was thinking or feeling.

Chirk squeezed Jason’s shoulder with his big, warm hand. ‘We’ll have a good talk about it later,’ he promised us – quite safely, I thought, because it was clear he would never stay long enough in one place to have a good talk about anything. He moved off, taking Milly with him – to my regret – and Jason said, ‘If you would like to do that, Mr Grant, it could easily be arranged.’

‘I’d love to.’

‘Would you really?’ He sounded uncertain.

‘Of course.’

He nodded, there was just a hint of wariness in his eyes. He said, ‘Do you come from London, Mr Grant?’

‘Yes.’

‘I have always wanted to visit London. Most of my friends would prefer to go to America, but for me it has always been London. I think it is the centre of the world for me as Delphi was for the Ancient Greeks. Do you often see the Royal Family, Mr Grant?’

‘Well,’ I said dubiously, ‘I’m not exactly on their lunching list.’

‘I mean on state occasions. Riding in their golden coach.’

He was not child-like; he looked amused at his own eagerness. 'They always seem such good people,' he said. 'Very gracious and good.'

I drew a long breath. 'I did see quite a lot of the Coronation, though that was a long time ago, of course.' I glanced cautiously round the room but there was no one to hear me indulging in this slightly shameful reminiscence. 'As a matter of fact, I was asked if I would drive one of the peers to the Abbey. He was an uncle of a colleague of mine, he was being a Gold Stick or something. . . .' I paused, put off by a sudden, physical memory of that icy, early morning wait, the boredom, the grey skies, the rain. . . .

'Go on,' he said.

'Well. Of course we got there early and we had to wait. But the scene was very impressive, the peers and peeresses in their scarlet robes. . . .' I went on, warming to the subject, and adding a few imaginatively colourful details for good measure. I was rewarded by seeing the wariness vanish and his face break open into a real smile.

He said, 'Do you know, I have come to Mr Chirk's house many times, he is very hospitable, but you are the first Englishman I have met here.'

'Have you known him long?'

'About a year. Since I came here, from Kisumu. He is very kind; sometimes I come in the evening and we listen to good music together. We do not talk about England, though, only about our problems here in Africa. He is a very nice man but he does not seem to want to talk about England, he does not have any Englishmen for friends. I do not understand that.'

He gave a little sigh. This had disappointed him. It was an old story, I thought: he had hoped Chirk would open a

new world to him, but men like Chirk can never do that, they are always a dead end. I felt sorry for Ralph Chirk. Young men like this one would come to him ignorant and remain ignorant because he could give them nothing; he could only impart goodwill and that is never enough. And once they had found that out they would move on and leave Chirk alone – always alone, with his sycophants, his hangers-on, his formless goodwill and his hygienic religion.

‘If you like,’ I said, ‘we could go down to the hotel and have a beer.’

He glanced towards Chirk and hesitated, but only for a moment.

‘I should like that very much,’ he said.



The Youth Centre was three mud rooms with cement floors and a corrugated iron roof. The carpenter's shop was empty except for some competent looking drawings on the black-board and a roughly made chair. In the metal shop there was a simple forge, an anvil, a clamp and some hammers; the only completed work was a metal wash-stand and an old oil lamp, inexpertly smartened up with aluminium paint. In the third room, two plump girls were working treadle sewing-machines with their big, splayed bare feet and on the veranda a scowling boy was mending an ancient bicycle. No one else was there except a crowd of half-naked children playing the usual game of Grandmother's Footsteps: when we moved, they moved silently behind us; when we turned to look at them they froze, shaking with giggles.

‘The sewing-machines are on loan from the Singer Company,’ Jason explained. ‘We are otherwise very short of materials – that is our difficulty. But the pupils are not here

because the staff has not been paid. The carpenter is a good man, he comes in the evenings sometimes, without pay, but the blacksmith is angry and has gone back to his shamba.'

'Why have they not been paid?'

He frowned, looking very stern and young. 'The centres are semi-autonomous. That is, the Government pay half and the people pay half — they get money from rates and from selling beer. But the Government only pays its share when the people have paid. They used to have an old woman here who made good beer, but she died and they have not bothered to replace her. The people in this district are lazy and ignorant. They do not understand the principle of Self-Help. That is my job, to teach them.'

He squared his shoulders proudly under his white shirt. 'This afternoon, there will be a meeting of the Locational Council and the parents of the boys and I shall try to explain things to them. The boys who come here are not clever boys, like the boys who get into the secondary schools. So it is not always easy to explain to their parents that they must be educated too. I am afraid it may take a long time.' He grinned and then a look of tense anxiety came into his face. 'I do hope you won't be *bored*.'

I was charmed, both by his solicitude and by the quaintly public school inflexion in his voice. The English leave behind such curious legacies: football, court-houses that are really meant for playing squash, the accent of Eton and Harrow.

'Don't worry,' I said. 'I won't be.'

I was further from being bored than I had ever been. As we walked away from the centre towards the lake and the jetty and the single, dusty street of wooden shops, I felt an upsurge of happiness, the absurd, irrational happiness that tingles behind the eye, the happiness I had felt almost con-

stantly since I had arrived in Africa. It was a feeling I am half-ashamed to admit to – there is something so naïve, so *irresponsible* about happiness. No European should be happy in Africa, there are too many problems we have either created or not tried hard enough to solve : guilt is our portion. I can only say I didn't feel it though I wasn't blind to the things I had read about before I came – my mother's training has ensured that I always do my homework well – or to the things I had seen : the malnutrition; the settler problem; the tribal problem; the economic problem. I wasn't blind, but I saw things through rose-coloured spectacles; looking back. I can remember how the flamingoes turned a stinking, brown lake the colour of a rose.

This lake was grey-blue, rippling on white sand. The smell of drying fish was hideous. The dried fish were ridiculously small. The fisherman selling them was small and plump with a round, plump, cheerful face. I said to Jason, 'Tell him these fish should have been thrown back in the lake.'

The man laughed and answered, in English, 'The women like them small. If I have no little fish, they won't buy.'

'But if you catch all the little fish, they can't breed and soon there will be no fish in the lake. Then you will starve.'

He threw back his head and laughed. 'But if I don't have the small fish for the women, my family will starve. My wives, my children, and my old mother.' His eyes shone at me gaily, bright as copper coins in the sun.

Jason said, 'It is not a joke. You have to think of the future. What will your children eat if you use up all the fish?'

His smile vanished and he looked at Jason with a sullen expression. 'There is plenty fish in the lake,' he said. He added something in Swahili; the words spurted out with a contemptuous sound. Jason listened, frowning. Then he

shouted something angrily, waving his hands. The man spat on the ground and then laughed as we walked away.

'He is a foolish, ignorant man,' Jay said. We reached the Land Rover and he leaned against it limply. His whole body seemed suddenly boneless with despair. 'There are so many who are ignorant and foolish, how can you teach them? It is the same in everything. The doctor at the hospital, the African doctor says that he knows they only scrub out the health clinics when he comes to visit them. I know a dresser – trained for four years in a big hospital in Nairobi – who fills the syringes with water when the children come for injections and sells the penicillin. What can you do?' His voice rose. 'You talk to them, they listen – and then they laugh and go back to doing just what they were doing before.'

He was almost in tears. I remembered something Agnew had said. 'Once we've gone, the Administration will go to hell. Not because we haven't trained them as well as we could though we haven't trained enough of them – but because they won't keep their tempers. We're crafty, we've learned to be patient, but *they* won't be patient. They'll shout and bully.'

I said, 'You have to go slowly. You can't change things overnight.'

He said distractedly, 'But there is so little *time*.'

'It doesn't help to get worked up about it.'

'No.' He rolled his eyes shyly. 'No. But it makes me ashamed when they will not learn. They are my people and I want to respect them.'

There was Agnew's answer I thought, ridiculously pleased. A white man could afford to be patient with ignorance and folly. He might work with skill, care even with love, but he was never completely involved; he was safe behind centuries of superiority, safe behind his white skin. He could afford to

be indulgent, Jason couldn't. The fisherman's poverty and stupidity was *his* poverty and stupidity, not something to endure philosophically or to make jokes about at the club. And he had so little to fight it with, no tradition of leadership, no inherited experience – nothing, except his youth and his sincerity, those terribly inadequate weapons. In his white shirt and grey flannels – a curiously natty, urban figure in that flat, yellow landscape – he looked very frail and gallant. I felt two things; the almost physical fear with which you dread a child's disappointment and also a kind of envy. The things he had to face in this young-old continent were simple, basic; food or hunger, disease or health, life or death. To live here – not to be him, just to live here – would be a good kind of life; purpose and truth breaking through the clouds of staleness and anxiety, like the sun.

*

Though the Locational Council meeting *was* boring it was a pleasant boredom; since I understood nothing I could relax into a complete suspension of effort. Jason talked in Swahili, reading from notes. I was reminded of a boy reading the lesson in church. His speech was translated into local dialect by the Chief, a large, loosely-assembled man with a big face and ruined nose who wore a pin-striped city suit with wide, old-fashioned lapels. It was very hot under the tin roof of the hall. The air was so warm and moist that it was almost tangible; you felt you could scoop it up in a spoon. An insect buzzed continually. In the front row, the old men went to sleep, like old men everywhere. I think I went to sleep myself. I don't remember the end of the meeting, only going out into the white light that stung the eyeballs and having a long, halting conversation about football with the Chief.

Two children were standing by the Land Rover, a boy in baggy khaki shorts and a smaller girl in a green dress that reached half-way down her muddy, thin calves. The boy spoke to the Chief who asked Jason a question. He shrugged his shoulders and turned to me.

'Do you mind if the girl comes with us? Her brother says she has to go to hospital.'

He spoke as if my convenience mattered more than anything else. I said, surprised, 'Of course not.'

The Chief spoke to the girl who climbed into the back of the truck. She was tiny, with stick-like limbs and enormous, expressionless eyes. I smiled at her while Jason talked with the Chief and she stared back at me blankly.

As we drove off I asked Jay what was wrong with her.

'The Chief says she has a bad kidney disease. The doctor thinks she will die.'

I looked round. She was crouching on the metal seat, knees drawn up to her bare chest, still as a hare in its form. 'Is there anything we can do? Would she like anything?'

He didn't answer. There wasn't any answer. I fumbled in my coat pocket for the bar of melting chocolate that was left from the picnic lunch Mrs Agnew had packed for me. I held it out to her. She didn't move so I tossed it onto the seat beside her. Watching her in the mirror, Jason spoke to her and she whispered softly, '*Asanti sana*.'

'She says, "Thank you",' Jason said.

*

Agnew was in a gloomy mood. There was to be a social evening at the club and a showing of film transparencies on the projector.

'It'll be boring beyond belief,' he warned me. 'Fantom, my

D.O. Two is just back from home leave and he's got a whole series of what you might call the English Scene. Beefeaters, Trooping the Colour, the lot. And Prout's got a whole lot too. Self and Family on the beach at Mombasa. Curious isn't it, how the ordinary Englishman, the sort of chap who barely ever glances in a mirror, can set out to bore everyone to death with pictures of himself? I mean, for Christ's sake, I *know* what Prout looks like – not a bad-looking chap in a beefy way but I've got him here, I can look at him sixty times a day. I don't need to look at him on a screen to refresh my memory, do I?

'I'm afraid you do.' Mrs Agnew looked up from her interminable knitting. She was an addict, a chain-knitter, her hands in a constant flutter of needles and wool. 'Unless you'd like to send a note down to say you're not well ' I did think you were starting a cold this morning.'

Agnew hesitated, fear of boredom and pride in his health battling within him. 'No,' he said, sighing, 'I'll have to turn up' He looked at me despondently. 'But there's no reason on earth why you should. Unless you're dead keen, that is.'

'Not really.' I had arranged to meet Jay at the hotel, in the outer bar. The inner bar, a cosier place, had a notice up, Residents Only. I had never seen a resident there, I don't believe there were any, but it was always full of local Europeans stuffing themselves on free olives and nuts. I said, 'Unless – oh, never mind.' The idea seemed about as futile as giving a sick child chocolate.

'What?' Agnew's blue eyes looked straight at me.

I felt oddly exposed. I explained about Jay; Agnew knew I had been seeing a lot of him in the last two weeks. 'It struck me that he might enjoy this evening's show rather

more than we would. The Trooping of the Colour part, anyway. He's awfully keen on England.' I smiled boyishly.

'I'm glad to hear it,' Agnew said in a light, dry voice.

I said, with affected ingenuousness, 'You did say Africans could come to the club as visitors? I know I'm only a temporary member but does that mean I can't introduce guests?'

He gave me a sharp look but he was too honest to take advantage of this let-out. 'No. No, of course not.' His wife gave a little, suppressed sigh. Frowning, he glanced at her. She had ducked her head and was counting the stitches on her needles with great concentration. 'What do you think, dear?'

'Twenty-four, twenty-five. . . .' She looked up, but with a vacant expression, her lips continuing to move. 'I don't really know,' she said.

Husband and wife looked at each other. I was reminded of the family obligation to show a common front, to hide the grisly secret from the stranger.

'Nbola's a pleasant youngster,' Agnew said heavily.

Mrs Agnew smiled. When she smiled, her false teeth clicked like her knitting needles.

'You'll have to ask the committee's permission, won't you, dear?' She gave me a cold look and went back to counting her stitches.

*

Prout said, 'It's out of the question. We're showing our holiday slides.'

He glared challengingly at the only other member of the club committee we had been able to muster at short notice. He was a small man in faded khaki with patches of dark

sweat under his arms. He had a round, soft face; he looked a little like a neurotic pug. He smiled with nervous geniality, first at Prout, then at Agnew. 'It might be a bit dull,' he murmured.

'I don't suppose young Nbola would mind,' Agnew said. He smiled, though his eyes looked tired.

'I suppose not,' said the neurotic pug. He looked with shy hope at Prout who scowled at his beer. Hope dying, he added, 'Though perhaps that isn't quite the point. . . .'

'It certainly isn't,' Prout said. He drained his glass and set it down on the table with a *thump*, pale, hairy fists tightly clenched on either side of it.

Agnew looked blank and fingered the wart on his cheek.

'What is the point then?' I asked pleasantly.

Prout looked at me. He said, enunciating each word very slowly and clearly as if I were deaf or unutterably stupid, 'Why - *I might show a picture of Mrs Prout in a bathing costume.*'

'I don't suppose Mr Nbola would mind that either,' I said. Pug Face let out a nervous titter. Prout stood up; the skin round his nose had gone so pale that it was almost grey.

'My God - that's all we want. A lot of bloody niggers pawing over our women. God - this is the only place we can enjoy ourselves without having them breathe down our necks. If you want to go off with them, that's your look-out. I dare-say Ralph Chirk can find plenty more little black pals for you to play with. But don't bring them here, stinking the place out.'

He turned and stalked across the long, church-social room; his buttocks quivered and his shoes creaked at every step. The door slammed behind him.

Pug Face said, unnecessarily, 'Of course, James really does feel very strongly.' He jumped to his feet. 'What about a little

liquid refreshment " He bore our glasses over to the bar. Agnew's eyes met mine guiltily

'Sorry,' he said I was afraid the answer might be no But but it's a bit like a parody, isn't it "

I said, 'In a year, maybe less, the people you're so anxious to keep out of your holy club will be your rulers, won't they?'

He said, quite sharply, 'Meantime I have to keep the peace. I can't order the committee to change the rules.'

'It mightn't do any harm. Conceivably, it might do some good.'

His face folded into lines of tiredness and anxiety, he looked like a man preparing to fight a battle he did not quite believe in

'Perhaps. But, to be honest with you, a lot of the chaps we have here aren't — aren't *much*. I don't just mean that they're not liberal intellectuals. I mean that in England they wouldn't have anything like the status they have here — responsibility, servants, things like that. They know this, at bottom, and it makes them jumpy. You can't ask too much of limited people, you know — you can't get a chap out to build roads and pay him the sort of salary *we* pay him and expect him to turn out a kind of Bertrand Russell.'

'No. But you could expect someone better than Prout.'

'Most of them are better. He's an extreme case. I though I don't suppose you'd find anyone who really wanted Africans in this club — except Chink perhaps, and he's not a member anyway. They need somewhere to escape to — somewhere they won't have them breathing down their necks, as Prout says. He sighed and leaned forward, rubbing his pudgy cheeks with the heel of his hand. 'Look — I don't doubt Nbola is infinitely superior, both as a man and as an intelligence to poor James Prout. Prout isn't an intelligence

really, he's just a set of reactions. You puts your penny in and the record pops up. But that isn't to say Prout isn't important, or that it isn't worth keeping him happy. In fact he's very important. He's a bloody good agricultural officer. The work he's done round here is as good as any in East Africa. And that makes him important, not just to us but to Africa – far more important than your friend Chirk, for example. . . .'

The gibe was unlike him. It sprang from irritation and despair.

I said, just as stupidly, 'I'm not so taken with Chirk.' We looked at each other in embarrassment. I said quickly, 'I can see he might be just as tiresome as Prout.'

Agnew answered, equally quickly, 'Of course one can see how he got pushed into this exaggerated pro-black position.'

'Faced with someone like Prout?'

We both smiled, relieved.

Agnew said, 'It's the most difficult thing in the world to be moderate in your opinions. Especially here. It's easier if you live in a temperate climate.'

'Or if you're just a visitor to a hot one.'

'I'm afraid so.'

Though I had meant to help him out -- as my part in this tactful duet -- I was irritated by the comfortable smugness of his tone.

He went on, 'You get on well with Nbola, I take it? He's a good chap. We could do with a lot more like him.'

'I like him. He's coming down to Nairobi to see me off next week. He's got some leave.' I glanced at Agnew; this seemed a suitable moment for a spot of judicious blackmail. 'As a matter of fact, I'm hoping to persuade him to have a shot at one of those Government grants to go to England --

Commonwealth scholarships or whatever they're called. Anyway, to find out about them.'

'Do you think he'd like that? Well tell him to let me know if he applies and I'll see what I can do.' He cleared his throat. 'I'm sorry this happened. You can tell Nbola so, if you like. I wouldn't want this stupid affair to upset him.'

It won't Because I hadn't mentioned it.'

'Oh. No of course not.' His eyes smiled at me openly. Don't let it upset you either.'

'It hasn't,' I said. 'I don't give a tuppenny damn for Prout.'

4

REALLY, though, it was Prout who prompted me to offer Jay a home. Even if there were few full-blown Prouts around, there were enough Prout-ish sentiments to worry me. I was not being charitable to Jay — I am not a charitable person. I simply couldn't stand the thought of chicken-necked landladies shutting the door on his hopeful, smiling face. I had stressed the financial necessity of the arrangement to Louise, partly I suppose because I didn't want her to think me sentimental, but chiefly because I knew it would have more effect. Louise is a feminist — it would seem to her of the first importance that Agnes should be provided for — and she is also a patriot: she cannot believe that there is any real colour prejudice in England, even if some people are a bit 'stupid'. 'Stupid' is a word Louise uses a lot to explain away human wickedness and folly: she likes to think well of people.

As a matter of fact, I didn't much care whether Agnes was well provided for or not. I thought her a horrible woman. I had been prepared, when Jay took me to visit her, to find that she was less sophisticated than he was — few Africans have educated wives — but I had been shocked to find someone so actively unappealing. She was a big, giggly woman, fat and smooth like a swollen black fruit, with dusty looking hair that was fastened into tiny pigtails all over her head. They must have taken her a long time to arrange; certainly there was no sign of her finding time to do anything else. The children looked healthy enough but the house was filthy. It was a new house, a box-like structure with a corrugated iron roof. The floor of the main room was covered with a linoleum

square, vilely patterned – wherever you could see the colours through the dirt – in purple and orange. The only furniture was a derelict sofa and a bookcase containing the novels of Buchan and Henty, prizes Jay had won at the mission school. There was a biscuit tin lid with a picture of the Queen on it tacked to one wall. While I was there, one of the children opened a door into what was presumably a bedroom, a dark, windowless hole, musty as an old hen run. The chief burden of Agnes's conversation, through giggles, was a complaint that Jay had not been offered one of the Government bungalows: perhaps she thought I could do something about it. I thought it hardly surprising; one could sav of Agnes, with truth, that she would probably have kept coals in the bath, or whatever is the African equivalent.

It seemed a miracle that Jay should have emerged from such a background. I was astonished that he seemed so fond, almost proud, of Agnes and even more surprised, when I mentioned my visit to Mrs Agnew, to hear her say Mrs Nbola was a very nice woman. A bit lazy, she conceded, when I said I thought Jay deserved something better, but cheerful and sensible. Her attitude made me furious: it hinted at a patronizing double standard. She wouldn't have wanted *her* son to marry Agnes, surely? She answered this with an odd look and said in her flat, cool voice that this could hardly arise, could it? Her son was only thirteen and Agnes was married already.



At least Jay would have somewhere comfortable while he stayed with us. I had painted the spare room – the sluttish Agnes had been in my mind while I did it. It looked very pleasant, with apple-green walls, a grey carpet and a new

yellow bed-cover. Jay was delighted. He said, smiling at Louise, 'You have a beautiful home. It is in lovely taste, like a church.'

Our house is Victorian and full of bad stained glass. 'I'm glad you like it,' Louise said.

The telephone rang. I went to answer it in the bedroom. 'Has *he* arrived yet?' my mother-in-law said. She spoke in a sepulchral voice, like someone announcing a death.

'All safe and sound,' I said. 'You're out of luck, Julia.'

'Don't talk like that, Tom,' she said in a livelier tone. 'I don't wish your young man any harm. I just thought there might have been a hitch somewhere.'

'No. No plane crash, no nothing. Thank you for the hot water bottle.'

'Don't mention it. I may not approve of your guest, Tom, but I wouldn't want him to be *cold*. I bought the kind that has a special spiny cover so that he can't burn himself - he won't be used to hot water bottles.'

'That's very thoughtful of you.'

'Not really. It was a line Boots were selling off cheap - I happened to see it when I went in to change my library book. Am I invited for Sunday?'

'Of course. If you want to come in the circumstances.'

'I'm not going to avoid your house for a whole year, Tom. Nor am I going to play box and cox with Mr Kenyatta.'

'Nbola.'

'Mr Nbubble, then.' She gave an exasperated, trilling laugh as if it was too absurd to expect her to remember such a ridiculous name. 'It's quite bad enough having to play box and cox with Him. Though I don't suppose He manages to drag himself away from the Abode of Love very often.'

This time the anonymous pronoun referred to Louise's

father, Augustus Trim. Julia seldom gave names to people who were beyond the pale. The woman for whom Augustus had left Julia twenty-five years ago, was That Creature. There had been a legal separation giving Julia the custody of the children but she had refused to divorce him - out of spite, Louise told me. I don't think this could have been true; Julia is never spiteful, she enjoys life too much. She simply found it preferable, less dull, anyway, to be an abandoned wife than a divorcée: it meant that she continued to be involved in an interesting situation. She could still say to people - she had gone on saying it for twenty-five years - 'My husband is living in sin with his secretary' This hint of boudoir rapture cast a kind of perverse glamour over her own lot.

It presented rather a distorted picture, though. There could have been few couples as cosy and respectable as Augustus and his wife - I could not, really, think of her as anything else. Certainly, she could never have been a sequined siren except in Julia's lusty imagination. When young, she was probably prettily wholesome, now in her late forties, she looked ten years older, a tubby soul who wore gold-rimmed spectacles and elastic stockings and enjoyed a nice game of whist. Louise and her brother, Reginald, called her Auntie. Louise was fond of her but her affection, like her father's, was indulgent and slightly contemptuous, the affection you show to a good, gentle dog. And Auntie - her name was Georgiana - behaved rather like one. Her manner was always grateful; a shade apologetic.

She would have been a great disappointment to Julia had they met, and worse. Julia was not easily humiliated but one look at Georgiana would have compelled her to re-think her own part in her husband's defection. It was to spare her this

mortifying exercise that I frustrated Louise's attempts to bring her mother and father together – *'it's so childish of them after all these years'* – and to play Julia's game whenever Augustus and Georgiana came to see us. Their visits were not frequent. Augustus could not often tear himself away from his week-end golf. But when they did come for lunch, Julia always decided to 'pop in' for tea. She would telephone at intervals during the afternoon to ask if 'They' had gone, often using an assumed voice in case Augustus should answer her ring. Again, this wasn't spite on her part, simply a lively dramatic sense. She did not even resent Louise's affection for her father; indeed, she often said, 'You must be a comfort to him, dear. He needs his children's love more than ever now.'

I said, 'He's not coming next Sunday, anyway.'

'Oh, good.' Sounding slightly disappointed, she added, 'Perhaps it's just as well. He was never as broad-minded as I am.'

'Wasn't he? Anyway, he has some business conference in Rome.'

'I suppose She's gone with him.' She paused, sighing a little to underline how much she had lost, then continued, 'I believe the weather is atrocious in Italy just now. I'll see you on Sunday, then. Twelve-thirty. And don't worry, Tom. Manners makyth man. I'll be nice to Mr Whatever-his-name-is.'

'I never doubted it, Julia. I'll see he has a bath before you come.'

I put the telephone down, smiling. A conversation with Julia affected me like a brisk work-out must affect a boxer: I felt toned up after it. I went downstairs to the drawing-room, bouncing athletically on the balls of my feet.

Louise was slightly flushed with the first drink of the day. She looked remarkably pretty, crouching on the sofa with her feet tucked under her and leaning slightly forward, in a position that gave her a tense, excited air. As I came in, she was talking in a low, rapid voice.

'Of course, British behaviour in Kenya must have made all Africans terribly bitter. I'm surprised any of you *speak* to us. I can't bear to think of it. They say the women are the worst. But you *must* understand, Jay, that very few people here, in England, are really like that. English people are really awfully considerate to underprivileged people. I mean London must be the most cosmopolitan city on earth, we have all races here, Chinese, Negroes, Jews . . .'

'Lay off, darling,' I said. Jay was looking startled, sitting bolt upright at the other end of the sofa with a large drink in his hand. Louise had given him gin which he didn't drink but obviously had not liked to refuse.

He said uneasily, 'Do you mean, Mrs Grant, that there is no colour prejudice in England?' That is not what I have been told. I thought, some time ago, there was a battle on a hill outside London.'

Louise glanced at me half apologetically and half for enlightenment.

'The Battle of Notting, darling,' I said.

'Oh.' She smiled prettily at Jay. 'Please call me Louise. That was nothing, really. Just a few delinquent boys and undesirable elements, it was stupid, really. Everyone was horrified.'

'Rubbish,' I said. 'The whole country's stuffed full of little Hitlers, just aching to find someone to fix their grudges on.'

'Oh, Tom,' she said reproachfully.

'If there's been less trouble here than in some other places it's because we're more law-abiding. Also because we've never had much of a problem, as they have in America, say, except in some overcrowded areas. Wait till you get a real bout of unemployment – on Moss side, for example – and see how the nice, tolerant British behave then.'

'Tom, you're being *horrid*,' Louise said.

'I'm only trying to make you face up to the facts of life,' I said, enjoying myself. 'And the facts of life are that the only people who can afford to be tolerant are the comfortable ones who've got a warm place to sleep and food in their bellies. The moment you haven't, you turn on the nearest whipping boy – the Irish, the Jews, the Blacks. That reminds me, I saw an advertisement for rooms in the paper shop that said 'Sorry, No Welsh'. A splendidly *recherché* prejudice, I thought. But the point is, people aren't *nice*. Only the lucky ones.'

'You don't believe that. You're just striking an attitude,' Louise cried. Her voice rose shrilly, the way it always did when I behaved like this. The pain in her eyes was the pain of all trusting, gentle people confronted with cynicism. I loved her for it, but it always made me sadistic. 'I'm just a realist, that's all,' I said comfortably. 'I admit it would be nice to think as you do that people only need a little help and encouragement to love their neighbours as themselves but we all know now that anyone who does is a neurotic – or worse, raving mad. Normal people are just as self-centred and grasping as we were when we first dropped down from the trees.'

'*Oh*,' said Louise, '*Oh*.' She drew a deep breath and said in a loud voice, 'Tom, you're being hateful – you're being just like my *mother*. You enjoy being a prophet of doom, even

though you don't believe any of it. You like to think of yourself, sitting among the ruins and gloating.'

Her face was beet-red with vexation. She rose from the sofa in an agile movement and advanced on me, fists clenched. I took a step backwards, for safety's sake, but she halted a yard away and stood, glowering.

I grinned at Jay. 'You'll get used to her in time,' I said.

Jay was looking at Louise. 'African women do not shout at men,' he said.

It was not a reproof, simply an expression of bewilderment, but I saw Louise start, as at an unexpected jab in the back. She swung round and stared at Jay with an astonishment that I thought I understood. She had seen her relationship with him as entirely one-sided and benign. It was a difficult moment for her, as difficult as it must have been for Pygmalion when Galatea first answered him back.

But Louise is sensitive enough. She learns her lessons quickly. She said, humbly, 'I'm sorry. I didn't mean to shout. But Tom does get on my nerves sometimes.'

'He just likes to talk,' Jay said serenely and suddenly they both smiled at each other in a gently indulgent way that made me feel left out.

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This feeling persisted throughout the evening. It was as if they had both entered into an unspoken alliance against me. As a result I was provoked to fresh absurdities which made them exchange glances that said, 'Let the Boy have his say.' I did not altogether mind this build-up as an *enfant terrible* – it took me back to my boyhood when I had enjoyed shocking my mother and her frumpish friends. But it was unlike Louise to behave like this. She was clearly enjoying herself;

from time to time she looked at me with a little air of mischievous superiority. I was torn between two emotions. I was glad they were getting on so well – I had feared they might not – but I was also irritated, perhaps very slightly jealous. . . .

Don't misunderstand me – I liked to see Louise happy. Our relationship had always been a loving one but love by itself is seldom enough; married people – childless married people, anyway – have to be something else to each other besides lovers, to avoid boredom. So when I teased Louise for her terribly sentimental approach to things – I, of course, was the voice of reason – it was simply to provide spice in the matrimonial pudding. When she did not react, I felt lost; I simply did not know how to treat her.

It was remarkably late before Louise suggested we go to bed. She was usually obsessional about getting nine hours sleep every night. When I had filled Jay's hot water bottle and settled him for the night, I went into our bedroom to find her creaming her face in front of the glass and humming tunelessly. She looked very well and pretty.

I said, 'You enjoyed yourself this evening, didn't you.'

She paused, a grubby Kleenex in her hand, and beamed at me.

'I thought we all did,' she said. There was no inquiry in her tone. Clearly she had no idea, or pretended to have no idea, that I was hurt.

'It was an excellent dinner,' I said pointedly.

'Yes, wasn't it?' She tossed the Kleenex into the waste basket and unscrewed the lid of a new looking jar. She began to cover her face with a white paste.

'Whatever's that?'

'It tones up the pores. You have to leave it a minute or two while it dries.'

She sat, her face immobile, her eyes a dark, glittering blue in the white mask.

I picked up the jar and sniffed at it. 'It's a foul smell.' Experimentally, I rubbed a little on the side of my nose.

'Don't waste it,' she said sharply. The skin round her mouth had tightened into a prunes and prisms O so that she sounded like a little girl having an elocution lesson.

'I don't see why my pores shouldn't be toned up too.' All the same, I put the jar down. 'Though it seems a bit futile, inst before you go to bed. Won't the pores have loosened up again by the morning?'

She gave me a pitying smile — rather ridiculous in that stiff, clown's face — and got up from her stool to go to the bathroom. I heard the water running. Presumably, she was washing off the mask. I undressed and got into bed.

She didn't look at me when she came back but began to tidy, picking up my clothes as well as her own and hanging them carefully in the wardrobe. Then she sat down on the stool again to brush her hair. That finished, she rubbed cream into her hands, holding them aloft and smoothing each finger separately. Usually these arcane rites did not worry me — in fact, I enjoyed watching her — but tonight her absorption in them bothered me.

I said, 'Do you like Jay?'

'What? Oh -- yes.' She put her hand cream away and blew at a film of dust on the dressing-table before she stood up to take off her gown. 'I think he's an absolute *love* and a *pet*,' she said. This awkwardly gushing, schoolgirl tone was one I had often heard her use when she was talking to her mother or to women friends. She screwed up her face thoughtfully and said in a more normal voice, 'I did not really expected anyone so nice. I suppose because I'd not really thought about

what he would be like. Does that sound silly? What I mean is, I'd wanted him to come and stay with us because he was African – someone different, someone I could sort of *boast* about. I hadn't really thought of him as a person. So it was an especially good surprise when he turned out to be so nice.'

For some reason her innocent honesty irritated me. No – *not* 'for some reason'. I knew why. She was saying what she thought quite simply for once, without wondering whether I would think it naïve. It seemed to mark the extent of her deliberate withdrawal from me.

I said, 'Do you find him attractive? Physically, I mean.'

'Of course not,' she said at once. She was standing quite still, poised with one knee on the bed. She looked at me attentively.

Her calmness goaded me.

'I suppose you couldn't possibly imagine being attracted to a *black man*.'

'Did you want me to be?'

I hadn't expected her to say that. 'No. But——'

'But what?' In spite of her sharp, schoolmarmish tone, she bit on her lip to conceal a slight tremor. This encouraged me.

'You wouldn't have said you weren't attracted to him in *quite that way* if he had been white.'

'Oh,' she said. 'Oh.' She began to laugh helplessly, doubling up as if she had a pain in her stomach. She collapsed on the bed and laughed until the tears came. Her face was lustrous with a shining mixture of tears and face cream. 'Oh, Tom,' she said, on a sighing breath, 'you are funny.'

I lay, rigid with offence. 'I'm glad you think so.'

She giggled weakly. 'Whatever I said would have been wrong, wouldn't it?'

'I suppose so,' I admitted reluctantly.

She giggled again and got into bed.

Neither of us spoke for a moment. I moved my leg against her thigh. She lay still. I put out a tentative hand to touch her breast but she shook it off, flouncing over onto her side.

‘I’m worn out, laughing,’ she said.

‘There’s always an excuse,’ I said, trying to sound good-humoured. She was always so hurt if I showed disappointment.

She gave an indignant snort and prodded her bottom towards me.

‘Make me a chair.’

I curled round in the way she liked to sleep, with my knees under her knees, my left hand gently encircling her waist but not ‘touching’ her, as she put it.

She was asleep in two minutes.

5

I HEARD Jay coughing while I was in the bathroom. When I came down to breakfast he was sitting at the table, looking pinched. He smiled with agonized politeness every time a cough shook him.

'You've caught a cold,' Louise accused him and flew upstairs for the thermometer. His temperature was up; we put him to bed with Julia's spiny hot water bottle and gave him hot lemon juice. He lay there for two days, looking very young and fragile and resigned in a pair of black satin pyjamas embroidered with purple peacocks. (Where did he get them? Louise asked, awed.)

To my relief, she did not seem to mind looking after him: in fact, she positively enjoyed it. She bullied him as if he were a favourite younger brother; forced him to drink warm milk, which he hated, and taught him to play *béziq*ue.

On the third morning his fever had gone but he was still coughing – in no state, Louise said firmly, to go and meet Philip at the airport. Though it would have been difficult, as I had two lectures that morning, I offered to fetch the child, but she said there was no need, she was perfectly capable. She was in a manic mood; she raced round the house, washing up the breakfast dishes, lighting fires, heating milk to leave by Jay's bedside.

'Don't wear yourself out,' I said.

'I won't.' She looked at me. 'It's nice to have someone to do things for.'

'I wish we'd had that baby,' I said suddenly. It was something I hadn't said, or thought about, for a long time; now,

remembering her misery, her terrible sense of failure, the long, exhausted bouts of weeping, I wished I hadn't spoken.

But she was not in a mood to be distressed.

'We might still.' She smiled and kissed me.

*

When I got back that afternoon Jay was sitting by the fire with Philip on his lap, asleep.

He was more simian looking than Jay. His face was like one of those rubber moulds children use to make shapes out of Polyfilla. Awake, gazing at us with mournful brown eyes, he was appealing, like a sad-eyed monkey or a picture in an advertisement for Famine Relief. He was pathetically thin; the neat, school suit Jay's uncle had bought for him in Nairobi hung on him like a grey sack.

'All African children have thin legs,' I comforted Louise, who was almost weeping in the kitchen over the pathos of his appearance.

'But he won't eat anything,' she wailed. 'And I can't get him to speak to me.'

'He's scared. It's all horribly new. Don't worry, he'll pick up in a day or two.'

I had underestimated his resilience. Within an hour he was excitedly exploring the house, rushing up and down stairs on his pea-stick legs – he fell down them twice because stairs were new to him too – shouting with laughter and asking questions. 'What's this for, Auntie Louise, how does it work, why, why, why?' He was certainly not scared of us; when I sat down he climbed on my lap, butting me in the stomach with his sharp little knees while Jay watched him with loving pride from the other side of the hearth. 'He is so glad to be here, with his Uncle Tom.'

Louise beamed on us all and made plans. Philip was due at his school on Monday, but we had the week-end. If Jay was well enough, we would all take Philip to the zoo on Saturday. (Why, I wondered? Surely it would be rather like taking an English child to inspect a lot of caged dogs and cats?)

'And on Sunday, of course, he can play with Giles,' Louise said in a bright voice, avoiding my eyes.

'Giles?' I said, thunderstruck.

She gave one of her little pursed-up sighs to show it was irritating of me not to know something I had not been told about.

'Reggie and Shirley are staying for a few days with Mother. They've got the children with them. Did you expect them to leave them behind?' she asked indignantly. I raised my eyebrows and she turned pink. 'I'm *positive* I told you.'

'You did not.' I explained to Jay. 'Reginald Trim is Louise's brother. He lives in Nottingham.'

'But he has come to London to stay with your *mother*?' Jay's evident astonishment was puzzling.

'Why shouldn't he?' Louise asked.

Jay frowned. 'In my tribe, once we are married we do not stay with our parents. Not in the same house.'

'Why ever not?'

'It – it is not thought proper.'

'Why?' There was a glint in Louise's eyes; she liked to get to the bottom of things.

He looked shy. 'For reasons of modesty. Once you are married, it would be most embarrassing. Under your mother's roof – to be naked in bed with a stranger.'

'Oh,' Louise said. 'I hadn't thought of it like that.'

'Why should you?' I said. 'It's a reasonable tabu when you

live in a hut. It's simply something that grew up because there were no houses with separate bedrooms. Like the Jewish tabu about not eating pork or shellfish because originally they lived in a hot climate.'

Jay said, 'My mother has a new house with two bedrooms, at Kitale. But I still stay with a cousin when I go to visit her.'

'And some English Jews don't eat bacon. Tabus hang on after the need for them is over.'

Louise said, 'But this is different from not eating bacon. I mean, this is a basic, human thing. I mean' - she looked at me and, surprisingly, blushed - 'when we stayed with Mother when we were first married, I was always horribly embarrassed when we went to bed.'

'Do you mean that?' I looked at her pink face and saw that she did. Certainly, it explained a few things that had been highly mysterious at the time. I threw back my head and laughed. Philip, still sitting on my lap, whinnied shrilly and toppled backwards onto the hearth rug. Louise picked him up. 'Time you went to bed,' she said. He took her hand with docility.

'I don't think I should mention the family sleeping arrangements to Louise's mother on Sunday,' I said, when they had gone.

'Of course not. I would never talk about such matters to an old English lady.'

I thought how little Julia would like that description. 'She is very well-preserved.'

'I am looking forward to meeting her. Louise told me that she lived much of her youth in Kenya. It will be interesting to discuss the changes there.'

I wondered about that. I had the uncomfortable feel-

ing that I should prepare him to face the Trim family *en masse*. It was something I did not find easy. Julia was one thing, Reginald another.

*

Reginald is one of those unfortunate men - though in his case one felt it was not so much misfortune as deliberate perversity - who combines and exaggerates the worse features of both parents. Augustus is a big man whose portliness is controlled to an extent that makes him almost graceful. Reginald is beefy -- or porcine, rather; a fat, unjolly man whose flesh appears to be contained not by muscle and skin but by his *clothes*: you feel that without the waistband of his trousers his belly would sheer off from him like jelly from a mould. In his mouth, his father's arrogant opinions formed in the happy, happy days when Britain was a First Class Power and an English gent was still a fine, secure thing to be - sound shrill, whining, tasteless and a little fearful. When Louise was still trying to make me like him she used to say he was 'basically insecure'. It was the most sympathetic thing she could find to say about him. Certainly, if he isn't insecure he ought to be, for he is his father in decline: fat without muscle, power without duty, arrogance without honour. Sitting with him over an expense-account lunch, watching those heavy jaws masticate the steak he will never pay for, you long to hear the creak of tumbrils.

He is a crashing money snob Julia's old-fashioned ladies-and-gentlemen snobbery has become coarsened in him - but like her he has a *nose*: he can tell what a man is worth by sniffing at him, at his car, his house, his wife's furs. Though he believes everyone except himself should do a good day's work for a good day's pay, he despises people who earn a

salary as witless loons. (No one he has ever heard of works for a weekly wage.) When Louise and I were first engaged he asked me what I earned as a lecturer in a technical college and snorted incredulously when I told him. 'You can't live on income nowadays,' was his only comment. He pronounced the word *income* the way a fastidious Victorian lady might have spoken of *tainted money*.

He has never suffered such a fate, though he came dangerously close to it when he qualified as a doctor when he came out of the Army. The introduction of the Health Service saved him by making medicine an uneconomic venture for a sensible man. He joined a drug firm to 'make his way' in the brief period before they made him a director he was 'Dr T.' in the glossy hand-outs generously dispersed to the simple-minded, hard-working general practitioners who had not realized that medicine was finished in this country. He made so much money doing this that he was able to buy a farm on which he could make a tax loss and so deprive the Government of the money they needed to buy the drugs his firm over-charged for. He married a wealthy American, a pretty, languid girl whose father manufactured razor blades, and fathered two children, Giles and Veronica, both born at the end of a financial year so that he was able to collect the tax allowance on them retrospectively.

*

'Has Dr Trim never practised?' Jay said in a puzzled voice.

'No. It wouldn't pay him well enough.'

'But surely, in England, a doctor receives a good income?'

I hesitated. 'A mere pittance, compared to what he could

make in business,' I said, quoting Reggie but not – unfortunately as it turned out – making this clear, and changed the subject. It seemed almost impossible to explain Reggie to Jay. Jay was too innocent and I was inhibited by shame.



They arrived on Sunday just before half past twelve. Skulking at the window of the sitting-room as they alighted from the Bentley I had that sinking feeling common, I suppose, to all men who have married into families larger and more affectionate than their own.

Julia saw me and waved cheerfully as she walked up the path between the standard roses. She was wearing a suit of bluish grey tweed and had had her hair newly dyed to match: she looked like a hyacinth. She wore an elaborate gilt choker and pink kid gloves. Behind her, Reggie's wife looked unready to face the world – as if she had just tumbled out of bed to answer the door and slipped into her mink coat for warmth. This was slightly unfair – Julia made most women look under-decorated and Shirley was naturally pale, though not from ill-health; she was tough enough to have survived nineteen years of Reggie and to have kept both her figure and that dewy, wise-virgin look American women so often have.

Her daughter did not look in the least virginal. At seventeen, Veronica looked twenty-seven, a tall, ripe, luscious twenty-seven with an undulating walk, a statuesque behind and a mouth soft and sweet and dark as a Victoria plum. She was a walking incitement to rape; if she had been *my* daughter, I sometimes thought despairingly, I would have kept her locked up in an attic with bars on the window and a eunuch on duty outside the door. She scared me; even now,

the knowledge that she was about to hold up her rich, pouting mouth for my avuncular kiss made me sweat with fear and regret. I dreaded the kiss and dreaded the moment when it would be over and she would withdraw out of reach with a low, muttered, insolent, 'Hallo, Uncle Tom', to perch in bored silence on the arm of a chair, occasionally yawning and stretching her long, beautiful legs.

This morning the kiss was perfunctory. She gave me the suggestive, smouldering smile she gave all males under ninety but with less thoughtful art than usual. Her mind was elsewhere: she was in the sitting-room and had got at Jay before the others had taken off their coats. I could hear her voice - low, rich and musical, like a stage vamp of the 'thirties - as I helped Shirley off with her mink and hung it on the special padded hanger Louise had brought down from the bedroom to preserve her brother's possession.

Julia seemed in a hurry, too. She pecked Louise's cheek and vanished. When I went into the sitting-room she had肘bowed Veronica out of the way and was shaking Jay's hand insistently. 'I am so delighted to meet you, I *do* hope they are looking after you properly.' Reggie and Shirley were close behind her. There was a great deal of convivial hand-shaking and laughter so that the sitting-room appeared at bursting point - it was moderately sized but the Trims would have made an empty railway station seem crowded - and the small chandelier danced on the ceiling.

The spectacle, which I watched from the doorway, was that of the Trim family presenting a united front to the world. If Louise was determined to entertain Blacks, they were equally determined to stand right behind her.

There was one awkward moment. When Julia saw Philip, who had retreated behind the door and so gone unnoticed

in her first impetuous rush through it, she let out a hoarse cry. 'Gracious heavens, what's *this*?'

Philip ran to his father and buried his face in his jacket.

Jay said, 'This is my son, Philip.' His eyes danced with pride and pleasure.

Astonished rage made Julia temporarily speechless. Oh, that we should have hidden this from her! Her eyes raked the room and nailed me with freezing fury.

'Say good morning to Mrs Trim, Philip,' Jay said gently.

'Good morning.' One sad, monkey's eye emerged from the folds of Jay's jacket to entrance Julia. She would have had to be made of stone. . . .

'Well . . .' she said, on an expiring breath, and bent as gracefully as her corsets would allow. 'How do you do, Philip?' She laid her ringed hand on his stiff, woolly head. 'I'd no idea Louise was looking after two of you.'

Her voice was gentle, but the words were meant to carry. Her message was clear: I would not get away with *this*. When she looked at me next, her face was pink and sparkling, not with anger now, but with the prospect of battle. I comforted myself with the thought that there would be little chance of our being alone together. I determined to lessen what chance there was.

I dispensed drinks all round, carefully avoiding Julia's eye and the touch of Veronica's fingers as I handed her her glass, then escaped to help Louise in the kitchen. Julia appeared there almost at once, on the pretext of despatching Giles and Philip to play in the back garden – they both wore a resigned and bullied air. I prepared to dart back to the sitting-room with a bottle of tonic water hastily snatched from the ice-box but, anticipating this, Julia moved quick as a fencer and planted herself slap in the doorway.

'Now, Tom,' she began, squaring up to me, her eyes bright. My heart sank; I preferred to joust with her on the telephone. To my relief, Shirley's tall, elegant form emerged from the shadows of the narrow hall. She slid her long hand round Julia's firm waist and said, 'Darling, guess what! I've an extraordinary thing to tell you. . . .'

I lingered, long enough to hear that some friend of Shirley's had seen Augustus and Georgiana in a restaurant in Rome where Georgiana, dressed in silver lamé, had been seen to dance all evening with an Italian count. It sounded preposterous, but seemed to please Julia. It was one of her hopes, expressed of course as a fear, that Georgiana would one day go off and leave Augustus for some younger, richer man. (*It would be so terrible if she went off and left him after all these years.*) I was surprised that Shirley should feed Julia a story of this kind - Shirley, after all, had *seen* Georgiana - but I suppose she did it out of affection for Julia and pity for her need. I liked her for this, though I could never have liked her, or any wife of Reggie's, for herself.

*

Back in the sitting-room, Reggie was standing before the fire looking rather like Charles Laugh' in as Mr Barrett of Wimpole Street, and listening to Jay with a curious expression on his face.

Jay was saying, 'I had no idea that doctors were so wretchedly paid in England. It came as a great shock to me.'

Except for his bulging eyelids that remained white, like two lumps of cold mutton fat, Reggie's face had gone an artificial-looking pink colour

'The professions are in an abominable state,' he said in a strangled voice. 'It's a sign of the times, part of the post-war picture. Everyone wants something for nothing – free medicine, free drugs, free education, free housing. . . . They look on the Government as a kind of nanny. So what happens? Taxation goes up and up. Even in business, we suffer appallingly. Initiative is strangled, progress held back. . . .'

Not surprisingly, Jay looked slightly bemused at this irrelevant outburst. 'I had not realized . . . it must be so distressing for you *personally*. Medicine is the noblest profession, high above all others. It is my one great hope that my son should be a doctor.'

'Hmm,' Reggie said inadequately.

'To have had to give it up, to be unable to help people as you would wish, must be a great sadness to you,' Jay said. Sympathy shone in his dark eyes like twin stars of gentleness. 'It must seem such a terrible waste of your great gifts,' he said.

Reggie did not answer. He opened and closed his mouth like some great, stranded fish. From the sofa, came an hysterical little snort. Veronica was huddled up, her hand in front of her mouth, her cheeks scarlet with amusement. For that moment she looked like the child she was, but the moment passed. As soon as she realized I was watching her she sat up straight, pulled in her waist, thrust out her pugnacious, beautiful breasts and hitched her short skirt an inch shorter. The reaction was automatic, though. Her attention was not on me, but on Jay. She was gazing at him, her sweet, plummy mouth slack and smiling.

I wondered if anything in the world could convince her that Jay had not intended to take a rise out of her father. I

was sure that if I told her he had spoken simply and sincerely she would only laugh with wild embarrassment. It made me feel suddenly sad.

'I think lunch is probably ready,' I said.



During lunch, I talked to Reggie about cars. This was the equivalent of giving a baby a dummy coated with honey; after a few minutes his wrathful, baffled eye ceased rolling in Jay's direction and I resigned myself to a didactic, male monologue on the virtues of the Trim's new Bentley. (It had no vices; no car of Reggie's ever had.) I nodded seriously, asked the right questions and listened with the rest of my mind to Julia's conversation with Jay about Kenya. It was barbed on her part, but merrily so - two sherries had put her in an amiable skittish mood.

Giles and Philip had come to some understanding during their enforced exile in the garden and giggled mysteriously throughout the meal. As soon as they had swallowed their ice-cream, Giles said loudly, 'Philip wants to go down to the park. He wants to go on the swings.'

Jay said, 'I have promised him. We do not have parks with swings at home.' He turned politely to Shirley. 'May I take your son for a small expedition there?'

'Of course. Go and wash, Giles dear.'

'It's not fair,' Giles said. 'Phil doesn't have to wash. His dirt doesn't show.'

'Ice-cream does,' Louise said.

Both children broke into screams of laughter and fell off their chairs. They raced out of the room and could be heard scuffling amicably on the stairs.

Jay said, 'It is splendid for Philip to meet an English boy

before he goes off to school. I expect Giles will give him some good advice on how to behave himself.'

'Just advice,' Veronica said darkly. 'Not *good* advice.' She had been eating like a horse; now she sat back with an air of satisfied and happy gluttony. Beneath suggestively lowered lids she looked at Jay in a melting, amorous way. 'Can I come to the park too?'

'It would be a pleasure,' Jay said cheerfully.

I intercepted the look Reggie and Shirley shot each other and braced myself for their refusal. But they were on their best behaviour today. Shirley - who never willingly walked anywhere - merely murmured that she would quite like to go to. She glanced at the grey, autumnal twilight lurking outside the window. It was a lovely day, she said, without enthusiasm.

Although it was my own opinion that Veronica should not be allowed out in public unveiled and without a bodyguard, I was immediately angry. Subconsciously, I suppose, I had been waiting for something like this. They would not have objected to her taking a pleasant little afternoon walk with a white man, would they? Did they expect Jay to fall upon her among the swings and roundabouts?

'I think I'll go too,' I said, glaring at Shirley. 'I could do with some *air*.'

'No,' Louise said involuntarily. She sent me a look of mute appeal; I must not leave her, alone with Julia and Reggie.

'Maybe I'd better stay and help with the washing up,' I said.

*

Once the door had closed, the storm broke.

'You must be mad,' Reggie said. 'The fellow's an impudent

cadger. I can tell his sort a mile off - out for all he can get without even the decency to be polite about it.'

Julia patted her hyacinth hair and placed a cigarette in a filter designed to abstract ninety per cent of the taint. She inhaled with gusto. 'There's no virtue in overstating your case, Reggie dear. He seemed a perfectly pleasant young man, very grateful for all Louise and Tom are doing for him.'

'I can see he has *charm*,' Reggie said. 'For women, anyway. But I tell you he's unreliable and impudent. Impudent,' he repeated heavily and looked at me. 'No one's going to make a monkey out of me.'

'He wasn't trying to make a monkey out of you,' I said. 'He was simply sympathizing.'

Julia said quickly, 'Now I want to be *fun*. If he was rude to you, Reggie, I'm sure it was unintentional and you must remember he has not had your opportunities. You mustn't expect too much from simple people. My worry is that Tom and Louise may have bitten off more than they can chew. I know these people better than you, Tom. Give them an inch and they'll take an ell. I don't suppose you knew the child was coming, did you?'

Taken by surprise, Louise shook her head. 'No. I mean, he told us just as soon as he got here. I don't mind at all, he's a dear little boy. And he's going to boarding-school tomorrow.'

'I know that's the idea, but how long it will last I wouldn't like to say.' She paused, one eyebrow raised. 'But it just goes to show, doesn't it? I'm sure he won't be your first unexpected visitor, not by a long chalk. Africans have more relations than any other nation in the world - and I daresay all *his* relations aren't as clean and nicely behaved as he is. Or seems to be *at the moment*. I could tell you a few tales if I wanted to!'

She stubbed out her cigarette, replaced the holder in her gold-clasped crocodile bag and addressed me. 'Don't think I don't appreciate your motives, Tom. You're a very generous, liberal-minded man.' Her wise-serpent smile showed that this was not a compliment. 'I know you want to be kind to this African and Louise wants to please you, but you must be fair to *her*. After all, the extra work will come onto her, won't it? And you know how easily she knocks herself up.'

'Oh, Mother,' Louise said.

'Louise is as strong as a horse,' I said.

Julia raised her eyebrows to make it clear that she thought me both unsympathetic and untruthful. As if I hadn't taken the point, she said reproachfully, 'Now, Tom, you know she's not strong.'

All right, I thought, I may be unsympathetic but you're a domineering pig of an old woman who would like nothing better than to keep her daughter paralytic on a sofa. Very early in our acquaintance — actually, the second time I brought Louise home from a cinema — Julia had told me she was 'not strong'. There was some slight foundation for this as there was for most of Julia's arguments: as a child, Louise had had a 'heart murmur'. This had been discovered shortly after Augustus had gone off with Georgiana and Julia had made more of it than was medically necessary — at first, it seemed, to tempt the straying Augustus back to the hearth and later to clamp her daughter closer to her. She had removed Louise from her school and treated her thereafter like a Victorian girl in a decline; she refused to let her play games and made her rest every afternoon. When we were first married, Louise was nervous of running for a bus or walking fast uphill. I took her to a specialist and she was a little relieved, a little ashamed, to find that although she was anaemic,

the heart murmur was unimportant. But Julia's cosseting had had its effect. Louise could remember occasions when her mother had clung to her, weeping. 'You must take care, my darling, you mustn't die and leave Mummy.' She spoke of this lightly but sometimes when she was with her mother you could see the fear in her eyes; she moved more slowly, she actually *looked* frailer. She was looking pale now.

I said, 'Louise is as tough as you are. Maybe that's an overstatement but she's certainly as tough as *I* am.'

Julia said pleasantly, 'I know you think I'm fussy, Tom. But you must make allowances for a mother's anxiety. It's natural that a healthy young man should be impatient of sickness – delicate women are boring. But I have the feeling that Louise is too aware of this. I've often noticed that she tries to hide it from you when she's tired or not well. She's a good, brave girl, but it's your job to *notice*. Louise needs looking after, all women do.'

She gave a little, sad, half-sigh and fluttered her sticky, pointed eyelashes, reminding us all of the long years she had fought on gallantly alone. Few women could have been better equipped for this lonely struggle, as Augustus, a sensitive, conscientious man, must have known.

I said rudely, 'Oh, come off it, Julia. This is a lot of crapulous nonsense, and you know it.'

Her eyes brightened. 'Do you think I don't understand my own daughter?'

'Oh, shut up, *both* of you.' Louise was standing with her back pressed against the wall as if facing a firing squad. She was white as a lily. 'You go on as if I wasn't here,' she said bitterly and slammed out through the door.

We heard the sound of pans being hauled violently into the stainless steel sink.

Julia gave me a sparkling, triumphant look – *now see what you've done* – and sailed out after her. The kitchen door closed.

'Well,' Reggie sighed, cying the mess on the table with distaste. The idea that we might help to clear up lunch was quite foreign to him. He had given up asking us why we did not have an *au pair* girl to live in since Louise had told him we liked to have the house to ourselves so we could hold sexual orgies in private. (The real reason, that we couldn't afford much help because we supported my mother, he did not believe or, rather, did not comprehend: in Reggie's world no old woman would have allowed herself to be left so foolishly unprovided for.)

'We might as well make ourselves comfortable,' he said.

We went into the sitting-room. Reggie settled his pendulous behind into the most comfortable chair, took a bottle from his waistcoat pocket and meditatively sucked a digestion tablet while I made up the fire. He opened his cigar case.

'Mother is a bit obsessional about Lou.'

'Yes'

'Mind you, I'm not saying she hasn't reason to be worried. Even if there's nothing wrong with her organically, she's not exactly a toughie. Though it's not her health that worries me.' His lips opened wetly to receive the cigar. He puffed in silence, his eyes on the fire. Finally, he said, 'Of course it's none of her business, none of mine, either. But I must say I don't think you're altogether wise, old man. This chap may be all right – though to be honest, I wouldn't fancy him in my house *but how can you tell, eh?*'

He shot this penetrating question at me, a gleam in his pale, boiled eyes. I shrugged my shoulders. He lowered his

voice, 'After all, Lou is going to be on her own with him quite a bit, isn't she? I mean, you work extra hours at the lab and so on and then she's left alone in the house when you go to visit your mother.'

'That's only once a week,' I said.

*

I went to Whitstable on Wednesdays, for the night. I went alone because since her condition had deteriorated my mother had taken a dislike, not to Louise particularly, but to all strangers. And Louise was a stranger because she recognized nobody except Miss Foley, the elderly, bird-like maiden who lived next door and came in daily to care for her, and even she was often mistaken for Harriet, my mother's dead, elder sister, just as she confused me with Bertie – either her brother who died in the same year as Harriet or an equally loved and well-remembered Uncle Bertie who used to take her to the circus every Christmas, a big, cheerful man who kept a chemist's shop and brought her cough candy and long, twisted sticks of barley sugar. The small bungalow with its leaning, ramshackle veranda and cosy sitting-room that used to be so full of kindly, *Daily Express*-reading middle-aged ladies warming their plump knees before the fire, was now peopled only with the dead. Her husband was not among them. He, her love, for whose sake she had stayed widowed though she had had 'opportunities' – I remember one, a boyish, elderly schoolmaster who came at week-ends to cut her privet hedge and mow her pocket handkerchief of a lawn before I was considered man enough – no longer existed for her. It was the long-dead, the dead of her childhood who were her familiars: Bertie, old and young Bertie, old Mrs Perkins who kept the sweet-shop and her son, young Mr

Perkins who played the organ in church while young Bertie, her brother of twelve, blew the bellows for him. She talked to them and they answered her. They seemed gentle, happy ghosts; certainly I had never seen her frightened or upset by them.

Only the living frightened her; she hid from the doctor and the man who came to read the gas-meter. The last time, some years ago now, that I had taken Louise with me, she had thrown a brass inkstand at her. Though Louise was startled she had not cried out, but my mother had given a gasping wail like a child who knows she has done wrong and rushed into the bathroom. She would not come out until Miss Foley, speaking through the keyhole in the guise of Harriet, had assured her we had gone.

'How is your mother? Has she been violent again?' Reggie asked.

I shook my head. 'She's quite well.'

'But Louise never goes with you now, to see her?'

'No.'

There had been no point in it. And although Louise hated being alone in the house, she had never grumbled or shown she was hurt, as she must have been, since she loved my mother. Or had loved her, anyway; you can't love someone who is no longer there.

'Hmm.' Reggie examined the grey stalk at the end of his cigar with close attention. 'It doesn't seem a terribly satisfactory arrangement,' he said.

'Why not? Jay will be company for Louise,' I said breezily. I knew what Reggie was thinking and hoped he would allow me to ignore it.

But, of course, he didn't, he never would. He cleared his throat and said, 'I know it's awkward to talk about this sort

of thing but – well - it's best to come out in the open, don't you think? All Africans have a pretty strong sexual drive. Something to do with the climate. And you can't expect their moral standards to be the same as ours.' He gave me a sly and daring look, so taken up with this thought that he allowed the ash from his cigar to fall onto his protruding belly. One white hand rested, trembling a little, on his plump knee; his black socks sagged round ankles that were astonishingly delicate and white. I had the feeling Reggie had given me before – this was not the first time I had had a glimpse into this teeming area of his mind – that I was the only sane man in a world of lustful, grovelling *joyeurs*, that nasty, prurient world inhabited by judges, Sunday newspapers and men like Reggie, in which whenever a man and a woman were alone together the Devil made a third.

I said, irritated because my voice was shaking, 'Are you suggesting that Jay is likely to rape Louise? Or do you think she would be ready and willing to nip into bed with him?'

He looked shocked, I was glad to see, and said with helpless anger – helpless, because what else could he have meant, after all? 'Really, Tom. . . . For a moment his dislike of me, as basic and usually as politely hidden as mine of him, showed in an exasperated tightening of his full mouth. Grunting, he heaved himself more upright in his chair and brushed the cigar ash from his waistcoat.

He said evenly, 'I wasn't suggesting either thing. It just crossed my mind that if he didn't behave himself it might be rather unpleasant for my sister. That's all.'

He said 'my sister' in the same way that Julia sometimes said 'my daughter' – as if to impress on me that consanguinity gave them a naturally greater interest in Louise's well-being than I could ever have. I don't know why it should annoy me,

but then life is full of secret, minor annoyances that a reasonable man should be ashamed to confess to.

I said childishly, 'And for *my wife* too, I suppose. 'Though I can't imagine that the situation is likely to arise.' I dwelt on it for a minute. What did he envisage? Jay advancing on Louise with a leer while she stood cooking at the stove? I laughed and said, 'You've met Jay, surely you can see he's a perfectly civilized young man. This is just silly prejudice, why not admit it?'

'If I'm prejudiced, so are you,' Reggie said. He gave a deep, satisfied chuckle, as if he had probed my Achilles heel. 'You're besotted with him because he's black.'

I am sure he knew perfectly well that this was just about the biggest insult he could offer me.

6

ON his way to L.S.E., Jay saw a Jewish woman with a very long nose.

‘At first sight I could not believe it. But I did not wish to be rude and stare. So I rushed ahead of this lady, a long way, very fast. Then I turned round and walked back towards her so I could steal another look in passing. I have never seen such a nose before.’ He fingered his own with affectionate reproof. ‘Africans have such horrible noses – small and ugly and squashed up.’

He giggled – unlike an Englishman he could giggle without losing dignity or seeming a queer. He laughed not at jokes, or at people, but because he was happy or amused. Life had the zest and sparkle for him it had had for me those two months in Africa, only for Jay there was the added zest and sparkle of finding himself at last in his promised land.

He thought England wonderful – even Louise was slightly taken aback by how wonderful he thought England was. There were some things that even in her most patriotically dedicated moments it would not have occurred to her to list among her country’s attractions: large noses, porridge, rush hour travel – he adored the Tube – smog, the atrocious stained glass above our front door, the weather. . . .

The weather, seasonably damp and cold and dismal one day and as seasonably dry and crisp and cold the next, entranced him like a changing theatrical backdrop set up daily for his benefit. He got up at seven to listen to the forecast, heard it again at eight, read it in the morning paper, tapped the barometer whenever he passed it and peered endlessly out

of the window in the hope that he would find the forecasts were wrong. He longed for snow. There was a thick fog two weeks after he arrived and he came home, hours late, bursting with the excitement of it. He had been trapped in a train that had waited for a whole hour outside Waterloo Station : the experience had astonished him.

‘No one *spoke*,’ he said incredulously. ‘We sat for a whole hour, cut off from the civilized world and no one spoke. I found this quite extraordinary. Though I am not being quite truthful. After half an hour - I had been gazing at my watch - I plucked up my courage and spoke to the gentleman on my left. I said, “Will we be stranded for the night, do you think?” I was really afraid that we might be, that we would sit all night, ten of us, never speaking. He answered me. He said, “There are always delays in this weather.” I was so pleased to hear a voice, I hoped now the ice was broken we might get into conversation to pass the time but all he said was, “Would you like to read my newspaper?” It was clear he was afraid I might want to talk. I felt I had done wrong to speak in the first place. I sat for the rest of the time and read the *Evening Standard*, not daring to raise my eyes.’

Though he smiled at me, he told this story for Louise’s benefit. She took great delight in the things that interested or amused him; in anything, however obvious, that emphasized his difference, his strangeness. There was a stimulated femininity in the way she encouraged him, a kind of mild, sexual flutter to which he responded on the same level : that of an innocent, well-regulated flirtation. Like an old-fashioned beau he preened himself in front of her and brought her anecdotes, instead of flowers.

She said, ‘English people are awfully reserved.’ Her forehead creased with the effort to discover an attractive reason

for this. 'I think it's because we're such a crowded country. We have to live at such awfully close quarters all the time – trains and buses at the rush hour, that sort of thing, that we can only bear it by pretending the others don't exist. I suppose it's a kind of respect for other people's privacy too.'

'Everyone here is very polite,' Jay said. 'Sometimes they are so polite that you cannot tell what they think. Though they are always asking what *you* think. There is one very nice old lady who sometimes has coffee with us after she has given her lecture and she is always saying, "What do *you* think, what is *your* opinion, Mr Nbola?"' He was a good mimic and produced uncannily well the clipped, high, accented voice of the elderly female academic. 'I cannot believe she is really so anxious to know. Except, of course, that she is very kind. She spends a great deal of time looking for suitable places for foreign students to live. It is very difficult for Africans to find lodgings in some parts of London. Do you find that your neighbours object to my living here?'

Louise laughed. 'I should care if they did.'

I said, 'Why on earth should they?' I heard my own voice, high with affected surprise, and felt hot under the collar. Why should I want to patronize Jay by pretending a situation did not exist? It was a trap I had not wanted to fall into – and yet I had. I wanted to protect him from unpleasantness.

Actually, we would never have known if anyone did object. We were on nodding terms with only a few of our neighbours; with most of them we were on no terms at all. It was that kind of street. It ran from the main suburban road – W. H. Smith's, Boots, Sainsburys – to a dingy grey common; two short rows of tall, Victorian houses that presented a narrow, mean face to the world. Most of them were cheerfully modernized – you glimpsed through lighted windows the

clean, modern wallpapers, the Swedish-type furniture – but here and there like a darkened tooth in an otherwise hygienic mouth, was unregenerate brown paint, peeling, boarding-house shabbiness; rooms, let by a discreet advertisement in the paper shop, to a business lady or gentleman.

I said, 'I expect they think, if they think anything, that we are on to a good thing. Letting rooms for double the price to a coloured gentleman.'

'Oh, *Tom*,' Louise said in a shocked voice, blushing for me.

Jay was shocked too, but for a different reason, 'They could never say that if they knew you.' He had a habit of making embarrassing remarks like this in a tone of such solemn sincerity that from anyone else it would have sounded ironical.

Louise glanced at me and blushed still more deeply. 'Don't be silly, Jay. There's nothing exceptional about *us*.'

This was something she truly tried to believe. And yet she was proud of our friendship with Jay; she would often refer to him quite unnecessarily in conversation with other people, with heightened colour and a little toss of her head as if she wanted to make it plain to them that we were not as they were.

Jay said, 'Oh, but there is. Before I came to England I did not realize it, but now I do. Not many English people will invite us into their homes. Most of them are kind – but they are curious only, not friendly. They think, here is a black man, what are his opinions, what does he think on such and such a question? Never, here is a man, what is he like? Sometimes I feel like an exhibit, a sort of freak.'

I said, 'Weren't you curious about white men in Kenya? Why should we be any less curious?'

'Because you are not like African children, following the white people around and giggling. In Kenya, when I was a

little boy, my mother used to frighten me when I was naughty by saying the Europeans would come after me. So my curiosity was a sort of fear. I laughed because I was afraid. Even with Mr Chirk, who was so kind, I was a little afraid because I did not understand why he should prefer black men to white men. But I am not afraid of you because you are my friends – that is something different. You are the first white people I have ever felt comfortable with – you, and your charming mother.'

'Do you think Mother isn't curious?' Louise said

Jay frowned. 'Why should she be? She has met Africans before, though of course things were different then. I think she is a very charming and gracious old lady.'



There was no real reason why we should have been surprised by Julia's attitude. Though her prejudices were real, they had always played second fiddle to her inquisitiveness. She was one of those people – they are more often women than men – who take into middle-age the frank curiosity of children. Also, she could never bear to be left out of anything. Since we were determined to have Jay live with us, she was equally determined to squeeze the utmost entertainment out of the situation, and, in fact, succeeded to an extent that I imagine she had not expected to: after one or two slightly edgy meetings, her pleasure in Jay's company seemed to be quite real and unaffected. She flirted with him delicately, as she did with all young men, teased him, and gave him rather too much good advice.

She had been visiting us frequently partly because of the weather (it had suddenly become very cold and her all-electric flat suffered from power cuts) and partly because she

had Veronica staying with her. Veronica was attending some smart secretarial college or other; she had left, at her own request, the equally smart and unacademic boarding-school Reggie had sent her to, where she seemed to have learned little except Cordon Bleu cookery (though Julia said she couldn't boil an egg) and to talk in a high-pitched, exhausted drawl. *Her* reasons for wanting to come to see us were so obvious that I supposed they could not be obvious to Julia. If they had been, she would not have brought her.

Not for the first time, where Julia was concerned, I turned out to be wrong.



Throughout the evenings they spent with us, Veronica sat with her eyes fixed sleepily and adoringly on Jay. If anyone else said anything to her she moved her head slowly, like a waking dreamer, with a drugged, bemused, distantly surprised look as if a piece of furniture had spoken in her dream. While Jay was talking she listened raptly, her lips parted; occasionally she asked him questions in an uncharacteristically soft, meek voice. To my lecherously reminiscent eye, it seemed that even her physical appearance had changed. I did not see how she had managed it exactly, but the same clothes that had once displayed such a provocative amount of flesh and plump, nylon clad knees, were now mysteriously disposed in such a way as to give her the appearance of a modest girl brought up in an old-fashioned parsonage. She had abandoned make-up. I approved of the change in her – in theory, anyway. I supposed it must be Julia's influence and said so.

She laughed. 'My dear, Tom, it's nothing at all to do with me. She's smitten with your young man. He's very high-minded and she wants him to approve of her. All girls of that

age are chameleons. When *I* was eighteen, I remember, I was infatuated with a Welsh Nationalist music teacher we had. I went about dressed in daffodil yellow and chanting bits out of the Mabinogion '

I said grimly, 'I wonder who she was trying to impress before.'

'Oh, no one in particular, I should think. It was probably that frightful school, where they all sat about doing their nails.' She gave me a bright, wicked look. 'Unless she was trying to impress *you*.'

This didn't seem to reflect very favourably on me, I thought. Tom the bottom-pincher, the jolly, sex-mad uncle?

Having made her point, Julia went on thoughtfully, 'It's an improvement, I think. She's very empty-headed. An interest in other people is good for her — she's shown quite an intelligent interest in my bridge club's War on Want Committee for example. She's started to make some table mats for our bazaar. She wouldn't have cared a hoot about it if Jay hadn't taken her fancy.' She frowned judiciously. 'I think he's having rather a good effect on her, on the whole,' she said in a surprised tone.

Though I thought Julia's process of reasoning vulgar and loathed the idea of her particular War on Want Committee, (fat, complacent women in mink coats who would scream blue murder if you told them another sixpence on their husband's income tax would serve the same purpose more effectively), I supposed I agreed.

I wondered if Reggie would.

*

Jay saw his first snow. It came unseasonably early, obliterated the dirty streets, stopped the trains, burst the pipes, created

a national crisis and entranced him utterly. Wearing a rather strange felt hat – green, with a purple feather – and a scarlet muffler Julia had knitted for him, he went for long walks in the parks, looking like an exotic organ-grinder off duty.

One Sunday, we drove into Surrey through a Nordic fairy-land of white, silent skies and trees bristling with frost. We were to fetch Philip from his school and take him to lunch with Augustus and Georgiana; a rare invitation, since Augustus preferred to meet even his relations in town, over enormous lunches in stifling, expensive restaurants where even the smell gave me indigestion. Once he had told us that entertaining was ‘too much’ for Georgiana, but it was probably simply a habit he had fallen into during the early days of their ménage to avoid, for he was a conventionally thoughtful man, any snub that might come her way. I suspect that thoughtfulness had happily accorded with his own inclination which was naturally undomestic; he looked most at ease in bars or clubs, in the company of men. (Perhaps, too, there was something in Julia’s idea of the Abode of Love. Augustus was a shy man and shy men are often romantic. Perhaps he preferred to keep his mistress shut away in the fastness of his Surrey mansion – heated to eighty degrees and hung about with horse brasses – safely isolated from the indifferent world.)

The reason for this invitation was apparent as soon as we arrived. Veronica was there – the new Veronica – all maidenly smiles and lowered eyelids, wearing a white sweater and a full skirt of dark red wool. She had invited herself for the week-end. ‘I told Grandfather he simply had to ask all of you, too. The country looks so marvellous in this weather. I wanted Jay to see it. Doesn’t everything look absolutely stupendous, Jay?’

‘Stupendous,’ he agreed, smiling at her.

Georgiana, too, seemed glad we had come. She never talked much, as if afraid that the things she said were not worth other people wasting their time listening to, but she sat happily on the sofa with her puffy little feet in laced-up, old lady’s shoes riding clear of the floor and smiled her pretty, powdery old lady’s smile and blushed whenever anyone spoke to her. And she did talk to Philip – children and animals never frightened her – while Augustus poured drinks in rather an unhandy way like a man unaccustomed to the exercise.

Philip had changed in the weeks he had been at school. In the car, I had seen him look at his father covertly and with a slightly surprised expression. (Did he, too, look like that?) His manners were charming in a confident, old-fashioned way; he called me, and Augustus, sir. His voice had acquired that clear, high, carrying tone which is the hall mark of the English prep school boy; his speech was largely a vehicle for two adjectives: squalid and super.

‘Oh, *super*,’ he cried after lunch when Georgiana asked him if he would like to skate on the small lake at the bottom of the garden. ‘Oh, how absolutely *super*.’

‘But he hasn’t got any skates, Auntie dear,’ Louise said gently.

Georgiana blushed like a faded rose ‘I think I might . . . shall we see, Philip?’ She took his small paw and they went hand in hand – she was not much taller than he – out of the room.

On a shelf in a cupboard in the hall were several pairs of rather ancient looking skates and boots, carefully vaselined.

Georgiana looked at us anxiously ‘They’re all different sizes. Of course they may not fit anyone though.’

‘Who on earth do they all belong to?’ Louise said.

Georgiana blinked. 'Well – nobody. I mean, they're mine. I bought them at a Red Cross jumble sale in the summer. I happened to see them and I thought – well, suppose we had a hard winter, there's the lake and it would be nice to have them, just in case. Young people like to skate. So – so I put them away in vaseline and then, when I knew you were all coming, I got them out, just in case.'

What young people? The times Louise and I had come here in the last ten years could have been counted on the fingers of one hand. And, to my knowledge, this was Veronica's first visit since she was a child. I thought of Georgiana, plump and hot and lonely, walking past the stalls and seeing the skates and thinking of the young people who just might come, one winter, and want to use them. And then buying the skates and taking them home and putting them away in vaseline and rags. . .

'Oh, Aunt, you are an ass,' Louise said. Her eyes were shining. 'Let's see if they fit, shall we?' Philip here's a small pair, do you think they'll fit you?'

There were four pairs of adult skates, none big enough for me, but Jay and Louise and Veronica were fitted out with varying degrees of comfort. Philip seized the smallest and rushed excitedly into the garden. There was one pair left over, elegant skates with white kid boots.

'Actually,' Georgiana said, 'actually that pair is mine. I mean they belonged to me.'

'Georgie was a good skater,' Augustus said unexpectedly. 'Used to skate in competitions – got a lot of medals to prove it.'

His eyes twinkled; he had known this would astonish, as it did. We looked at Georgiana. Small and square in her good cashmere sweater and tweed skirt she looked, as she

did in whatever clothes she wore, rather like Mrs Tiggy Winkle.

'Then you must skate too,' Louise said 'Of course you must – you can show us how.'

Georgiana shook her head doubtfully, shyly pleased.

'Oh, come on, Auntie,' Veronica said. 'You know you're just aching to. . . .'

*

It was a good day, still, with a small, round, declining sun that reflected pink on the snow. Philip, with his black face and thin black legs looked strange – ridiculous, almost – against the white ice. He tottered like a crazy dancer, shrieking with excitement. Georgiana, a round, fur-coated bundle on tiny, efficient feet, took his hands and guided him round the lake. While the others struggled with their skates, Augustus and I stamped along the edge of the lake, clapping our arms for warmth. Augustus looked across at Georgiana, his pale eyes watering, his face red with frost and the sun's glow.

'D'you know, she used to be really *good*!' he said suddenly. 'Took it dead seriously – or, rather, her mother did.'

He laughed – an odd sound, short and deep and throaty, like a dog's cough. '*She* was mad – a real madwoman, now. She'd taken Georgie to the rink since she was a child, two, three times a week. Proper sessions with an instructor – she was having her trained for competitions, championships, that sort of thing. Like – like some kind of performing animal.' He pursed his mouth. 'Georgie hated it. Not the skating, she enjoyed that, but the competition side of it. Wrong sort of temperament altogether. She used to turn up at the bank sometimes looking like death. Stage fright, d'you see – it was always before one of these things her mother had made her

put in for. One day I asked her what the matter was – she was acting as my secretary at the time because mine was away ill – and she broke down. It made me laugh at first – I'd no idea people took that sort of thing seriously – then I saw it wasn't a thing to laugh *at*. So I asked her mother up to the office – interfering of me, I suppose, but we liked to think we took care of our staff at the bank and it was clear she couldn't put a stop to the nonsense herself. Couldn't say boo to a goose, that sort of girl. Well – the mother came and we had a great row. She was mad, stark staring mad. She said, what was I trying to do, ruin her daughter's career? I said – a bit pompous, I suppose, but I'd just been made a director and took myself seriously – that I'd thought her career was with *us* and the skating wasn't doing that any good, and she picked up her glass of sherry – I'd tried to keep the thing on a nice, sociable level – and chucked it straight in my face.' He laughed his queer laugh again. 'D'you know, I'd almost forgotten that? Funny how you forget things. . . .'

He looked at me half-shyly, his great, red face looming like a minor sun over his broad, astrakhan collar.

I said – I didn't think he'd resent it – 'Was it after that you and Georgie – I mean, was it after that you left Julia?' I was rather touched by the story; the chivalrous young tycoon and his shy typist. Though it didn't somehow, seem very *real*. Unlike Julia, neither Augustus nor Georgiana were the sort of people you could easily envisage twenty years earlier.

He said, 'Oh – it wasn't like that,' and looked bothered, either because he wished he hadn't told me or because he couldn't, really, remember how it *had* been. Then he said, 'I suppose I may have thought somebody ought to look after her,' and guffawed in a breezy, social manner, dismissing the

possibility of any more tender emotion, dismissing the ghosts of himself and his love. He said, looking out over the lake, casually avoiding my eye, 'I remember one winter when I was a boy, we had a terrible frost and we lugged braziers onto the ice – we had them to keep frost off the apple trees – and lit fires.'

The others were on the lake now. Veronica had skated before; with red cheeks and swirling, red skirt, she looked like some idealized portrayal of winter. Jay was nervous, shivering like a dog, but Veronica held him up, encouraging him. Louise was cautious, poking at the ice and laughing breathlessly. They had made a threesome with Veronica in the middle, supporting their unsteady strokes. On the far side of the lake, Georgiana was swinging Philip in a triumphant circle. We could hear their voices and the gritty sound of their skates over the thin powdering of snow. Philip collapsed, laughing and coughing as the lake and the black trees and the white snow went on turning about him.

Augustus said, 'This is a splendid treat for her. Having a boy to spoil. D'you think he'd like to come for a week-end some time, or a day or two in the holidays, perhaps?'

'I expect he'd love it.'

'His father wouldn't mind.'

'I shouldn't think so.'

'She likes children,' he said unnecessarily.

'Yes.'

Jay had fallen. Louise and Veronica had gone down with him; laughing, they got up, dusting the snow from their clothes. The sun had gone down behind a bank of black pines but trailing pink streaks of cloud remained in the sky. Jay was still sitting on the ice. His laughter, high-pitched, excited as Philip's, came to us across the lake.

Augustus said, 'He looks young to have a child that age.'
'He's twenty-eight. Africans marry young.'

'I suppose so.' He jabbed at the snow with his stick. 'Does Veronica see much of him?'

'No more than Julia. *She's* very taken with him.'

'He's very likeable. But I meant, otherwise than at your house.'

'I've no idea. What makes you think she does?'

'She's said so. She's talked about him. Continually.' He grinned, without amusement. 'I gathered they'd been meeting quite a bit – at some coffee-bar or other. It sounds harmless enough, but I don't know that Reggie would particularly care for it.'

The polite warning in his voice was clear. I said, 'Maybe not. But I'm not Jay's nanny, nor Veronica's either. Julia's looking after her.'

He said dryly, 'Julia's not responsible. She knows quite well how Reggie would feel if he knew, but she's equally capable of encouraging Veronica. She's encouraged her already, hasn't she, bringing her round to your house so often?'

I hadn't thought of it like that. I said, 'Julia's not malicious.'

'No. But she's a mischief-maker. Like a child – she likes to see how far she can go. It amuses her, I daresay, knowing Reggie's feelings, to watch the situation. But she won't stand by anything. If Reggie makes trouble, *she* won't take the blame.'

'I'm not frightened of Reggie,' I said impatiently.

He sighed. 'Of course not. But that's not the point, is it?' He looked at me. 'I'm not saying there's anything wrong. But Reggie would think there was. He may be right or wrong – though personally I'd not be too keen on my daughter getting

involved with a married black man, either. But Veronica will suffer if Reggie makes trouble.' He smiled at me confidently. 'I'd like you to have a word with Nbola.'

'And say what? Keep away from my niece-by-marriage or her father will be after your black hide?'

Augustus's smile became colder, but remained unruffled.

'I don't think you need put it quite like that, do you?'

Georgiana skated up to us -- or floated, rather: she had the air of a human Hovercraft, skimming the ice on a cushion of air. I realized suddenly that the extraordinary grace of her movements gave credence to Shirky's story about the Italian count. She was breathless and rosy, a faint vapour rose from her skin and misted her spectacles. 'You shouldn't stay out too long with your chest, dear,' she said.

She sat on a stone bench and he bent ponderously to help her with her skates. They went towards the house together; plump Mrs Tiggy Winkle with Augustus hunched over her like some large, benevolent, asthmatic bear. The agreeable Beatrix Potter image was deceptive, though. Augustus and Reggie -- and Prout and Hitler and Dr Verwoerd -- were one and the same. Augustus differed from them in that he was politer, more dignified, cleverer -- that bit about a *married* black man was a persuasive refinement neither Reggie nor Prout would have thought of -- but his basic assumptions were the same. The Red Menace, the Yellow Peril, the Chosen Race -- now, presumably, the Black Threat: for Augustus, too, the vast proportion of the human race were dehumanized. Even in his own country there would be the insignificant, the people-not-of-his-sort: charwomen, factory workers, bus conductors, electricians, plumbers, builders. Confident, masterful, sure of his superiority, Augustus was cut off from the majority of mankind.

I walked towards the others. Jay was limping. 'One of these savage women has wounded me with her skate,' he said cheerfully.

They supported him on either side and helped him into the house. Blood had soaked through his woollen sock; he sat on a chair in the hall while Louise rolled up his trouser leg and Veronica went for water and disinfectant. The cut was deep but clean. The two women knelt in front of him; Veronica held the basin while Louise bathed the cut. Dirty snow puddled round them on the polished floor. Jay winked at me. 'I feel like a pasha, being waited on by two charming ladies,' he said.

Veronica sat back on her heels. 'I wish I could be a nurse,' she said, with one of those huge sighs young girls sometimes give – fetched up from their boots, or their souls. 'I'd rather do that than be a typist, tap-tap-tapping in some dreary office all day long.'

It was impossible to be cynical. She looked so beautiful – her cheeks glowing with cold and exercise – so young, so innocently earnest.

Louise glanced at her and said, with unsympathetic abruptness, 'Bandages and bed-pans. You'd never stick it.'

She got up from her knees and bore the basin and the cotton-wool away to the kitchen.

Veronica flushed darkly. Jay smiled at her. 'Why not then? It is a fine profession.'

She scowled. 'I expect I'd be absolutely rotten at it, really. Dad says I never stick at anything.'

I said, 'Louise was only making a silly joke.'

'No, she wasn't. She despises me,' she said in a sullen voice. A large tear appeared at the corner of her eye and trickled sadly down her cheek.

Jay leaned forward and lifted her chin gently. 'You could stick at anything if you wanted to enough.'

His manner was tender and encouraging, he spoke as to a hurt child. For a moment she continued to stick out her lower lip, looking very babyish, sulky and despairing. Then she smiled reluctantly and moved her chin so that her cheek rested against the palm of Jay's hand. From this position she looked up at him, adoringly.

Augustus said, from the end of the hall, 'For goodness sake girl, get *up*.'

The peremptory harshness of his tone made his interpretation of the scene vulgarly apparent. He qualified it almost at once by adding in a forced, jocular way, 'You ought to know better at your age, sitting on the floor in all that wet,' but the message had got through. Veronica scrambled to her feet, her face flaming.

Augustus cleared his throat and said, to Jay, 'Louise said you got your leg cut. I hope she's fixed it up all right.'

Jay did not look up. He appeared to be staring intently at Augustus's boots. 'Yes, thank you, sir,' he said.

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If it had not been for this monstrosly stupid incident, I might well have spoken to Jay. There was just enough sense in what Augustus had said; I had no desire to see the girl get into some foolish row with her father. But Augustus's behaviour had made me angry – in fact, put me into such a white-hot rage that I could hardly be civil to him for the rest of the visit. However sensible his reasoning, it was prejudice that informed it. I saw no reason why I should pander to his grotesque vision of life.

I told Louise so, confident that she would back me up. Her attitude surprised me.

'I don't see why you're so angry, Tom. I thought father was very nice today.'

'He gave us a good lunch.'

She sighed. 'Is it so unreasonable that he should worry about his granddaughter meeting a married man on the sly?'

'Don't be vulgar. She's not been secretive about it, apparently.'

'Hasn't Jay?' She looked at me in the glass – she was sitting at the dressing-table, brushing her hair before going to bed – and her lips tightened as if she had scored a point.

'Jay doesn't have to tell us everything he does. Is it important that he and Veronica have been meeting each other for coffee occasionally?'

She twisted round on the stool and looked at me directly.

'Tom, tell me something. If you knew Veronica had been seeing some other friend of ours – some married Englishman, say, would you think it so unimportant?'

'I see your point. The answer is that I would be just as embarrassed at the idea of asking him about it.'

'Are you sure?'

'No'

She gave a little laugh and said conversationally, 'Tom, I do love you.' The atmosphere relaxed. She picked up her brush and turned back to the glass; I stood watching her.

'Tell *me* something, now. Do you think Veronica is in love with Jay?'

She frowned, as if she didn't much like the idea. 'She's got to be in love with somebody. Nobody commonplace. At her age, boredom and love don't go together.'

'Do they at thirty-four?'

Her eyes met mine pensively. 'Sometimes.'

I didn't like that very much but I smiled to show a sporting spirit and put my hands on her shoulders. 'So she loves Jay because he's exotic and different?'

'And because he's black.'

I hesitated. 'Do you really think so?'

She was hesitant too. 'Yes - you know, once, when I was about her age I suppose, I saw a film about a white woman and a Chinese bandit. The bandit fell in love with the white woman - she was a general's daughter, or something - and the bandit said, "would it offend you to be loved by a man of my race?" I remember it gave me a terrific thrill. . . .' She glanced at me and blushed faintly. 'I wonder - I suppose it's the idea of condescending to someone who is stronger than you are. Like Cophetua and the beggar maid in reverse, or - or Lady Chatterley and Mellors. Yes, *that's* more like it - didn't she, really, enjoy the idea of being raped *by an inferior?*'

I said, stilted because embarrassed, 'It seems a peculiar kind of sexual fantasy.'

'Why? Isn't sex supposed to be at the bottom of all colour feelings?'

She was staring at me, her cheeks very pink. I had meant 'peculiar' literally, but it seemed stupid to upset her by pointing this out.

So I said, 'Do you think Veronica really feels like this?'

'I was a young girl once,' she said in an offended voice and picked up her hairbrush.

'SHE just turned up one day in the coffee-bar he goes to,' Louise said on Tuesday evening. 'Since then, she's gone often. She persuaded Jay to take her to the pictures the other afternoon. He thinks she's playing truant from her classes.'

'Why hasn't he told us?'

'Embarrassed, I suppose. What could he say? It's clear she's running after him. Little tart.'

That was unlike Louise. 'Don't be daft,' I said. 'Can't you remember the sort of thing you did at seventeen?' (Hanging round the local railway station for the loved one to emerge, shadowing him home, dodging with thumping heart into a shop doorway whenever he turned round.) She had told me this once; I expected her to remember it, and smile.

'Girls aren't shy nowadays,' she said – darkly, like a woman of fifty. She stabbed her needle into the red sock. 'Jay's that she was darning'. 'Veronica knows what it's all about. I daresay she carries contraceptives in her handbag.'

'I read that article last Sunday too. We read too much. Veronica's only a child,' I said, with a twinge of doubt.

'Of course *you'd* be taken in. You're getting into your starry-eyed middle age,' Louise said. There was a satisfied venom in her manner that might have been funny if she had not been clearly so angry. 'But you can't expect Jay to be. You can't expect him to think of her as a child. In Africa, girls of seventeen are wives and mothers.'

'Did he say that?'

'More or less.' She bit off a length of wool. She could never

find a pair of scissors or a thimble. (Or stamps, or Sellotape or her fountain pen: 'Now where has it got to,' she would mutter distractedly, investing inanimate objects with a mysterious, malicious life.) 'I said we had a quaint attitude towards young girls in England. We respected their virtue – at least if they belonged to the right social class – and he'd better get used to it.'

'That was a bit mean, wasn't it?'

'I suppose so.' Her voice was dry, uncertain.

'I thought something was up.' I should have known. The signs had all been there: the odd, strained silence when I came home late this evening, Louise's pink-faced brusqueness at supper and Jay's hang-dog look. He had gone unusually early to bed. 'I might have guessed you'd had a row,' I said, and smiled: it didn't, really, seem very serious.

But tears stood in Louise's eyes. 'I'm a bitch,' she said with sudden, sad intensity. 'Though I didn't mean – I was just afraid he'd get the wrong idea if she threw herself at him. He can't be expected to know about English girls. But it went wrong. He stuck up for her, like you and – and I got angry and *he* got upset. . . .' She sniffed, fumbling for her handkerchief. As usual, she couldn't find it. I threw her mine and she blew her nose and said in a deliberate, sad, little-girl voice, 'Now I suppose he'll hate me.'

'Rubbish,' I said bracingly. 'Can I have my handkerchief *back*, please? Thank you.' I looked at her, hunched-up, red-nosed, tearful-eyed and sorry for herself and felt impatient, like an adult called in to settle a child's squabble. 'I can't think why you started it. You know Jay.' I thought of his hurt bewilderment and grew angry. 'You know quite well he's not the kind to take advantage of a silly girl.'

She bridled. '*I simply thought*,' she said with slow, sar-

castic emphasis, 'that *one* of us should take some responsibility for what might happen to our sixteen-year-old niece.'

'Seventeen.'

She sighed deeply and turned her head, presenting a cold, martyred profile.

'You weren't really worried about Veronica, were you?' I said curiously.

'Of course.' She sat rigid, cold as marble.

Her righteous dishonesty maddened me. 'I thought you said she could look after herself,' I snorted triumphantly. 'Contraceptives in her handbag!'

The suffering statue came to life. She turned on me, eyes blazing. 'I suppose *you're* always so consistent.'

I braced myself for an onslaught of home-truths but she jumped to her feet, upsetting the small table beside her and knocking her empty coffee cup into the hearth. The breakage distracted her. Though anger bubbled up inside her like a volcanic spring all she said was. 'Oh — oh, *you* —' It was the last thing she said that evening. She reddened and rushed from the room. I heard her laying the breakfast table with a great clatter of dishes. After what seemed a suitable interval I followed and asked, in a mild, placating tone, if I could help. She didn't answer. I said, would she like a warm drink? She tossed her head.

'Ordeal by silence?' I suggested. She flashed a look of cold dislike and swept past me, up the stairs. I went into the kitchen and heated milk with sugar and brandy, her favourite night-time tipple. She was already in bed when I carried it up to her, lying still as a corpse. Her hair was scraped into a white hair-net arrangement and her face was white with grease, completing the mortuary effect. I put the glass down on the night table and said, 'Louise,' but she didn't move a

muscle. I said, 'There's no arsenic in it,' but her mouth didn't twitch. I undressed, padded to the bathroom, came back : she still hadn't touched the milk.

I sighed loudly and got into bed; after a little, I reached across her. There was no point in wasting good food, as I said, aloud to the silent night. 'There's plenty of little children would be glad of your nice milk.' Not a stir, not a flicker. I began to feel foolish, like an over-jolly uncle at a wake. 'All right, have it your own way,' I said grumpily and turned over, hunching the bedclothes. Sleepily, I began to worry – not much, no more than a dull, hypochondriacal ache. It was unlike Louise, this spiteful silence. I wondered if she was getting the curse but didn't ask her. In the mood she was in, it was a question she was likely to resent.

It didn't occur to me that she might be jealous.

*

She was up virtuously early. No dressing-gowned sloppiness this morning; when I woke she was making up her face as if she were going to a party. The lipstick, the woollen dress straight from the cleaner's polythene bag, was a pointed reproach. 'Breakfast in fifteen minutes,' she said. A terrible, bright smile and she whisked from the room. Before we came down she called us twice from the bottom of the stairs. Her voice was like cracking ice. She was punishing us with her efficiency. I pulled a button off my shirt and Jav, I noticed, had cut himself shaving.

She couldn't keep it up. While we ate breakfast she picked at a piece of toast, pointedly un-hungry, miserably embarrassed; hunched up behind her newspaper like a small, brooding, angry animal. She was funny and frightening and sad. If Jay had not been there I would have kissed her, or

shouted at her; either would have produced tears and eased the situation. I tried a smile and got back a gimlet glare.

Suddenly, she said, 'Tom, why don't you take Jay with you to Whitstable?'

It was Wednesday. I had forgotten. I said, 'Why? Of course I could, but I hardly think it would be much fun for him.'

She hesitated. Then she turned crimson, her eyes sparking like diamonds. She said, in a suffocating voice, 'I wish you would. I'm going out this afternoon. I don't want to have to rush back to get supper.'

It was the crude, silly rudeness of a hurt child. She knew it – she couldn't bear her own behaviour. She got up, holding the empty coffee-pot between shaking hands and left the room. I would have gone after her – if only I *had* – but a look at Jay stopped me.

Misery sat on his face like sullenness. But it was real misery, not a child's cooked-up hysteria. Besides, Louise was not a child.

'She's a fool,' I said. 'I'm sorry, Jay.'

He shook his head. 'It's my fault,' he said. 'Last night, we – I have annoyed her.'

'I know.'

He looked at me doubtfully. 'I did not mean. . . . There is nothing.'

'All right. Leave it for now.' I looked at my watch. We were late. 'She's in a mood. Forget it.'

*

All the same, I decided to take him to Whitstable. I could put him up at an hotel and it would give Louise a chance to calm down. It wasn't her fault – by lunch-time I was able to

take a superior, masculine view – all women were the same, poor creatures, at the mercy of the moon. Smugly forgiving, I telephoned her once or twice but there was no answer.

I wasn't sorry. There would have been recriminations, tears, apologies, and I was glad of an excuse to have Jay's company on the long, bleak journey; extra glad, perhaps, because Louise would not be with us. (There is nothing sinister or suggestive in this remark. Louise, Jay and I had been very happy together, but I enjoyed being with him alone. At the bottom of any triangular relationship there is often a faint jealousy. In my case, it was infantile, not sexual: I felt Jay was *my* friend, *my* discovery.)

*

It was a long time since I had felt the need of friends. There had been three or four boys at school; we had shared sweets, jokes, enmities, but I couldn't, now, remember their names or faces. There had been others since, but I had married young, Louise was more sociable than I and though our friends were shared there was not one about whom I felt that curiosity, that desire to *know*, which had always been, for me, the essence of friendship.

Much more clear in my mind than my friends at school, clearer, even, than the young men I had known at college, were two old ladies who had lived in our street when I was young: Miss Florence and Miss Sylvia Doone. I don't know how old they were then; they seemed ancient to me in their queer, high-necked, long-skirted dresses that were always decorated with a great deal of yellow lace. Miss Sylvia had thin white hair in a bun; through the silk strands her scalp showed baby-pink. Miss Florence always wore a hat in the house – *she* had a hairy mole or wart that quivered when she

talked, on the right side of her puckered upper lip. Miss Sylvia did the housekeeping; Miss Florence taught the piano. 'Martha and Mary Our Lord would call us,' she once said to me. It was not a joke; they did not make jokes in that sense, though they were always laughing.

Miss Sylvia gave me hot buns smelling of spice when I came for my piano lesson. We had prayers before it; they were members of some curious, religious sect called – I think this is right – the Little Brothers. We knelt down in their tiny, musty front parlour that smelt faintly and sweetly of escaping gas, our folded hands placed neatly on the red tablecloth of the round table. Miss Florence and Miss Sylvia prayed loudly in turn with their eyes closed – squeezed tightly shut like children playing hide-and-seek.

Whatever their religion, it was very cheerful. Sometimes after the piano lesson we sang hymns for a treat; rather jolly ones, I thought. 'Oh, I'm H-A-P-P-Y, oh, I'm H-A-P-P-Y,' was a favourite one. They sang it with gusto in their saw-edged, high voices, Miss Sylvia beating time with her chapped, knuckly hands.

My mother disapproved of them because they were 'odd' and sometimes questioned me when I came home. 'Still, she doesn't charge much,' she would half-grumble, when I told her – reluctantly, though I didn't then understand why – about the hot buns and the hymn singing. When a friend of hers, the bachelor schoolmaster who cut her privet hedge, offered to teach me the piano for nothing, she was upset when I burst into tears. 'Whatever's the matter? Surely it'll be much nicer. You don't really want to go on going to that funny old lady? A big boy like you.'

'What'll you tell her?' I choked.

'Oh – she won't mind, you funny child. She's not qualified,

she can't expect to keep her pupils for long,' she said with a callousness that was probably assumed to cheer me up.

It produced a fresh storm of tears. I remembered my mother had said, when she arranged the small sum she was to pay for my lessons, 'It's not much, but it'll help them out, poor old souls.' Now they would be 'helped out' no longer - Miss Florence had no other pupils. They would probably 'end up in the workhouse', a fairly distant bogey, even in those days, but one that I had heard mentioned by my mother and her friends when they were discussing other friends who were not as thrifty as they were.

But the Misses Doone, apparently, were safe from such a fate.

'Nonsense,' my mother said when she had, as she thought, got to the bottom of my misery. 'They've both got a pension. Not just the Old Age, but something a little extra. There was quite a nice insurance when old Mrs Doone died. Why, you old silly billy, the little they charged for your lessons could hardly pay their milk bill!' I was silenced by my mother's volte-face, but relieved. 'Now,' she said, taking my arm and giving it a little shake, 'is that *all*?'

It wasn't all. But I was too young, eight, going on nine, to say that I would miss my evenings with the Misses Doone, too young to say that, in a sense, I loved them. And to tell the real truth would have been impossible for someone much older. . . .

I can remember the evening now. We were kneeling for the prayers and I was peeping through my fingers as I usually did, looking first at the picture directly in my line of vision (a sepia reproduction of the Light of the World and a coloured one of Hope Blindfold on a Globe) then at Miss Florence, rapt-faced, her whiskery wart lifted to heaven. I

wondered, idly, what it must feel like to have such a wart and then, whether I would feel differently from the way I did now, once I was grown and had hairs all over my chin. And then – it was like a light being switched on – did *she*? Did Miss Florence, ancient and hairy, feel the same as she had done when she was a little girl? Did she feel different from *me*?

I had a curious, thrilling sensation, not of excitement, exactly; it was more as if a door had opened through which my mind had begun to flow. Somewhere inside Miss Florence there was someone hiding, as there was in me. Everyone was two people, the person outside, who changed, and the person inside, who didn't. Later, when Miss Florence sang, 'Up to Heaven our spirits soar', it seemed to express my feeling exactly. Miss Florence's wart, like my thin legs my mother despaired of, was only a part of her.

Of course I couldn't have explained any of this, even if I had had the words at the time, to my mother. She had already complained of my friends that they 'filled me up with religion' as if it was some kind of unwholesome pudding. My revelation, if you can call it that, wasn't religious. Nor did it seem to have very much to do with me; it was a feeling so intense that it seemed to have a life of its own, mysterious and magical. It gave me an exultant affection and pride in Miss Florence (some of it spilled over onto Miss Sylvia) which was quite different in quality from anything I had felt before, for my mother, for my friends at school, for anyone I had known. Once, when we saw Miss Florence out shopping, my mother pulled me into Woolworth's to avoid meeting her. 'Really,' she said in shamed, angry explanation, 'why does she make herself look such a *guy*? She's too ridiculous.'

I was deeply hurt, as if she had spoken slightly of me. 'She's not,' I cried, 'she's not like that.'

But what *was* she like? I longed to know. I developed a fantasy of a magic button which, when twisted in a special way, would transport me inside Miss Florence's body, to think with her mind, look out through her eyes. Though it fascinated me, this exercise blurred the original, un-physical vision: the shared greatness of the human spirit. What had started as a passion, became a game. I would ask my school-friends, what do you *really* think, what do you *really* feel – a kind of questioning which became, of course, more acceptable once I had reached the university. The memory of what I felt for Miss Florence had deteriorated into vulgar curiosity: it remained the touchstone by which I judged friendship.

I said, 'What were you doing when you were eight, Jav?' and he laughed.

'Minding my father's cows,' he said.

*

I have said it was a long, bleak journey. That was an objective statement; I didn't find it bleak. For me, that hideous stretch out of London, the narrow roads, the small, crowded towns, the known delays and irritations were all a series of dear, familiar landmarks, pointing the way to the sea. With the first glimpse of it, of that flat, grey sweep beyond the white fields – hop fields bound in winter, fields of sour-smelling brussel tops raising their frosted heads above the snow – I always felt the old sense of excitement: I was coming home.

I didn't drive fast, I wanted to savour that sense of excitement. It was good to have someone to point out the landmarks to, particularly someone like Jav who, once he had got over his morning depression was as eager to come as he was eager for everything new; look forward to the journey with the excitement of a child hoping for the lucky charm in

the Christmas pudding. If Louise had been with me, we would have been in a hurry to get there, and getting there would have meant nothing to her except (though she would never have said this) a tedious, duty visit to an old, senile woman who had once thrown an inkstand at her. As it was, Jay and I stopped at a couple of pubs and drank quite a lot of beer – not enough to be drunk, but enough to relax and loosen the tongue. My tongue, anyway. What did we talk about? People, politics – my job, mainly, I think. It was something that bored Louise though she tried not to show it. I remember that by the time we turned onto the coastal road, ten miles from home, I felt smoothed out, lazily content. In half an hour, we would be at the sea. It didn't matter that it was winter; I had been happy in winter, playing among the closed and shuttered bathing huts, with the sea sucking on the pebbles like someone sweeping broken glass. I wound the window down a little and fancied I could smell seaweed and sewage – the smell of childhood and innocence.

Jay said suddenly, 'Tom, we should talk about last night. I have tried to explain to Louise, I should explain to you. I have met Veronica several times in the coffee-bar and once taken her to the cinema, but we have never been alone, we have never really spoken in private. I would never take advantage of such a young girl.'

'I know you wouldn't. It's a lot of nonsense.'

'Apparently Mr Augustus Trim did not think so. I am deeply sorry——'

'Louise *told* you Augustus was worried?' Though I did not want to discuss the matter – it was like some irrelevant old bore sitting between us in the car – this shocked me deeply. It was unlike Louise to be so tactlessly unkind.

'Yes. I think she had not meant to tell me, in the begin-

ning, but she – she was very angry,’ he said, apologizing for her. ‘She said Mr Trim thought it unwise because Veronica’s father might object.’ He paused and then said in a quite different tone of voice, a tone I had never heard from him before, ‘Because I am a black man who cannot, of course, be expected to behave in a decent and civilized manner’

‘Louise didn’t say that.’

‘No. Of course she would not.’

‘Then I don’t suppose Augustus meant anything of the sort. He only – —’

‘I think he did,’ Jay said, not indiguantly, but gently, as if explaining something to a child.

I said, with a craven attempt at innocence, ‘Aren’t you being a bit over-sensitive? After all, if he felt like that, he wouldn’t have had us all to lunch, would he?’

‘He is an extremely polite man,’ Jay said. He smiled without humour: he saw through politeness now. ‘I think there are a great many gentlemen like him, in England. You believe they are your friends – they even behave like friends but you find that in the end they cannot quite overlook the unfortunate little matter of your dirty black skin. It is better to have enemies than to make friends of such people.’

‘I’m sorry,’ I said uselessly.

‘I am not ungrateful for the lunch and the pleasant day,’ Jay said. ‘I wouldn’t like you to think I was. I liked Mrs Trim – the second Mrs Trim, very much. She is a gentle old lady. Philip liked her too. She said she would like to have Philip to stay.’

‘I’m sure she would. I think he’d enjoy it, don’t you?’

‘I don’t know.’ His profile was heavy and sullen.

‘It would be a great kindness to her.’

‘She would like to have a little black boy to show off to

her friends? So she can say, look how nice and liberal I am! I am putting him in my good bed, feeding him at my table, just as if he were a white child!’

I bit back an angry answer. He had every justification for almost anything he chose to say. ‘I don’t think Georgie has all that many friends.’

He was silent for a moment, then he said in a low voice, ‘I’m sorry, Tom. Mrs Trim is not like that. I was wrong to say it.’

‘No. She isn’t.’ Poor Georgie. She wouldn’t care if you were pink or green or yellow as long as you were nice to her. No – she was less demanding than that – as long as you would graciously allow *her* to be nice to *you*. People didn’t come much humbler than Georgie; if there were more people like her, the world would be a happier place. The snag was, no one would ever think of modelling themselves on Georgie so it didn’t matter a hoot what she was like or what she thought; the meek don’t inherit the earth. Or not this earth, anyway. ‘Georgie’s about as colour blind as you’ll get,’ I said. ‘Without being physically blind, that is. After all, you can’t expect anyone actually not to *notice* the colour of your skin, you black Nilotic, you!’

He laughed then and said he was sorry, he hadn’t meant to lose his temper and spoil our trip, he hadn’t meant to upset me when I’d been so good to him, etc., etc.; of course Philip must go and stay with the Trims, he knew he wanted to. He went on talking and apologizing – as if he *need* apologize, I thought wearily – but I wasn’t really listening. I felt as if I had unintentionally stumbled up against an unpleasant truth. Racial hatred was a universal infection, a common virus in the blood; if you lived in the world you were bound to contract it in one form or another. Very young children might

be immune, perhaps, and oddities like Georgie, but no one else. I wasn't, certainly. Surely, even the fact that I could talk so easily to Jay was a symptom of the disease? It is always simpler to talk to people you look down on a little, people you don't feel any need to impress. Of course I didn't consciously look down on Jay but the habit of superiority is there, in every white man, and habits are hard to break. The thought was unwelcome like the sense of defeat; I wound the window down to its fullest extent and slammed my foot on the accelerator.



I decided to announce my arrival before I took Jay to the hotel. I left him sitting in the car and pushed open the wooden gate with the tarnished brass plaque: 'Dumovin.' There was the familiar, rusty squeak, the familiar door knocker in the shape of a bearded man. Lifting the beard to knock, I stepped happily back into childhood — it had always seemed such a tremendous, side-splitting joke.

Miss Foley answered the door. She looked like a character in a child's book: a small owl, dressed in a badly knitted grey jersey. Her voice twittered like an excited bird's. 'We've been expecting you, Mr Grant, we've been quite excited, but we're watching telly just now.'

I went through the tiny hall — it always surprised me how small it was; two steps and you were in the sitting-room. No light was on, only the grey dusk outside and the grey, underwater gloom from the television set. My mother glanced at me, accepting my presence but not really taking it in; at once, her gaze returned to the screen.

Miss Foley said, 'I'll turn it off in a minute.'

'It's all right. Don't interrupt her.'

'Oh – she doesn't follow anything. But we have to go carefully. We have to wait until the people aren't looking, otherwise they might be angry if we switch them off.' She tiptoed with elaborate caution round the back of the set. My mother was watching the screen closely. Suddenly she said in her surprising, deep voice – rich and full as a preacher's – 'It's all right now, Harriet. They've turned their backs. Be quick.'

Miss Foley turned the switch and winked at me. 'I do have a game sometimes. Particularly with the news. *They* never take their eyes off you, do they!'

'No.' I refused to answer her arch, conspirator's smile. I hated her when she assumed an alliance between us against my poor Mum; the same against the mad. And despised myself for hating her too; she was good to my mother in a way only a very kind and very silly woman could be. Like children, the old and senile are best cared for by the good and simple-hearted; intelligent people are too impatient, their own lives more important. All the same, Miss Foley depressed and embarrassed me. I was always glad when she left, as she usually did, soon after I arrived. But before she went there had to be the usual questions, the routine of interest and gratitude.

'How has she been this week?' There was no need to lower my voice. Mother was still transfixed by the empty screen.

'We're quite well in ourselves. The doctor says he'd like us to take an opening medicine occasionally. We don't always do our duty as we should.' (An awkward little giggle.) 'But you know how we feel about drugs, so I've been persuading her to take a little All Bran in the mornings. I *hope* I did right.'

'You know what she needs, Miss Foley.'

'That's all right, then. Otherwise the doctor's very pleased. He says she's wonderful for her age.'

In my childhood, she had never been strong; there had been mysterious aches and pains – probably gynaecological, since the discussion of them had broken off whenever I came into the room. Now, in her mad old age, she was splendidly healthy. Varicose veins and constipation were the only things that troubled her. She ate well, her clear, blue eyes had the sparkle of youth, her skin the faint, peachy bloom of a girl's.

'They always *are* healthy,' Miss Foley said – whispered, because my mother had suddenly turned her calm, reflective gaze upon us. She said in a louder voice, 'We've done our hair in a new way. Don't you think it suits us?'

Hardly new. Her thick, auburn hair, only lightly streaked with grey, had been arranged in the monstrous car-phones that had probably been all the rage when Miss Foley was a girl; they suited my mother's rather heavy, Victorian face. She looked like one of those pictures of someone's dead, great-aunt, stiff and immortal in a silver-mounted oval frame.

She said to me, in her strong voice, 'You're putting on weight. You'll have to watch your diet. Harriet, are you off already?'

She rose, a gracious hostess, while Miss Foley pinned on her hat – black, with wool violets – in front of the glass on the chimney breast. 'I'll see you out dear, then I'll make Tom a cup of tea.' She wasn't confusing me with Bertie: this must be a good day. 'I've got some of those Small Rich Tea biscuits he likes.'

She ushered Miss Foley from the room, looking far and away the younger and stronger. In the hall she forgot what she had meant to do and halted with a lost, puzzled air. Then

she smiled, 'I must just take a look at my snowdrops,' she cried, and went to the front door.

'I'll nip out the back,' Miss Foley said. 'It's best – while she's looking at her garden. She doesn't really like to see me go.'

I went into the kitchen with her, thanked her, listened to her usual parting speech. (*Don't mention it, Mr Grant, she's such a sweet person with such sweet ways, it's a pleasure to do what I can for her*) thanked her again, paid her (so little for so much) and shut her out gratefully.

The front door was still open. My mother was bending over her rock garden, a mound, covered with snow. A few yards away, in the road, Jay had got out of the car and was cleaning the windscreen. As I came into the garden he smiled at me and my mother straightened and saw him. Annoyed with myself for having let this happen – if she thought I had brought a stranger with me, it would upset her for days – I stepped to her side quickly and put my hand under her arm, steadying her against a frightened outburst. But it didn't come. Astonishingly, a broad, calm smile spread over her face. She shook off my hand impatiently and advanced, beaming welcome, towards Jay who had approached the gate rather uncertainly (I had told him only that my mother was shy of strangers.)

'How lovely to see you after all these years,' my mother said. 'Won't you come in?'

Then her statuesque calm broke. A look of intense, childish excitement came into her face; she gave a half-skip like a little girl and ran back into the bungalow. We heard her call. 'What a surprise, dear. You'll never guess. Harriet – Harriet, it's Bobo come back. . . .'

'Miss Foley's gone, Mum,' I shouted after her and turned

to Jay, feeling foolish. 'You'd better come in. I don't know who——'

She appeared in the doorway, flushed, patting a plump ear-phone nervously with a white, plump hand. She looked coy.

I said, 'Mother dear, this is ——'

'Bobo,' she said, her voice loud and full. Then she smiled. 'Of course I know that's not your real name. Your real name escapes me for the moment. You must forgive me. It was such a surprise.' She looked at me, frowning. 'I didn't know you knew my son.'

Jay looked at me, puzzled. I shrugged my shoulders. I couldn't tell him anything. We followed her into the sitting-room.

'It'll come back in a minute,' my mother said. 'Don't tell me — Harriet is always telling me things. I like to remember on my own.' She looked at his dark, bewildered face. Then she gave a quick, light laugh — a girl's laugh, full of happiness. 'Of course. Mr Henderson. What *will* you think of me? Fancy my forgetting, after all those summers you stayed with us. I am a silly billy. Sit down — that's the most comfortable chair. Tom, you go and make the tea. We've got so much to talk about, Mr Henderson and I.'

I looked at Jay. He sat down and said slowly, 'It is very pleasant to see you, Mrs. Grant.' He caught my eye and gave me a quick, reassuring smile.

*

I could hear her talking away while I made tea in the kitchen. The pewter teapot, the cups and saucers, were set out ready on the chipped enamel tray with the peacocks on it; I remembered having meals served on that tray when I was a

child, in bed. I found the packet of Small Rich Tea and tipped it out onto the Coleport Batswing plate which was all that was left of the tea-set Great-great Aunt Polly had given my grandmother for a wedding present. I could have made a historical inventory of everything in that kitchen, of everything in the whole house. My mother never bought anything new. Even the double saucepan – mended, I noticed, with a piece of Elastoplast – was the one she had used to make porridge for me on school mornings in winter. Louise had once wanted, if we could not re-furnish the house, at least to replace the cracked and broken china, but chipped cups had memories for my mother: she put our presents away in the bottom drawer of the chest in her bedroom, the chest that had the burn mark where I had put the tea-pot down, one day when she, not I, was ill in bed.

I heard Jay's voice. 'I'll show Tom this, if I may. He will be interested.'

He came into the kitchen. He was holding the family album – heavy, bound in brown leather with a useless, brass lock. He was smiling gently. 'I think one of these is Mr Henderson,' he said.

Together we looked at the photograph of six nigger minstrels dressed in striped blazers and white flannels; singing, strumming the guitar, the piano. Underneath was written in beautiful copperplate: The Travelling Coons, Summer 1909.

Jay said, 'I understand Mr Henderson was an actor.'

'Yes. Of a kind.' How on earth should he know? 'They came round the seaside towns in summer, giving shows on the pier. They – they blacked their faces. My grandmother kept a boarding-house. A sort of cheap hotel. I suppose she must have put this lot up.'

He said, seriously, 'Won't your mother be surprised that I have not washed my face to come to tea?'

'No. She isn't quite logical.' I hesitated. 'Thank you for not laughing at her.'

He seemed surprised. 'Why should I? I admit I was somewhat astonished at first – but why should I laugh? You cannot help forgetting, when you are old.' He smiled gaily. 'I must remember that I am Henderson,' he said.

*

We had a very happy evening. It seems absurd, but we did. My mother asked Jay a few questions, but there was no awkwardness because she had no interest in the answers. She talked quite happily about Mr Henderson and Harriet and Uncle Bertie and other people we knew nothing about and between bursts of talk she sat, equally happy, in a dreamy silence. After supper, I opened the piano in the corner – it had a lattice work front, backed by dusty pink silk – and persuaded her to sing to us. She had liked singing as a girl, and as a young woman had sung in the Methodist choir. She played her own accompaniment and sang old songs in her good, deep, slightly hoarse voice, while Jay and I sat, stretched out to the fire listening and talking and dozing. It was very pleasant in that sitting-room which was ugly and commonplace and comfortable with a sagging, blue sofa and a worn, Indian carpet and the red velveteen curtains I remembered my mother buying at a sale in Canterbury. On one side of the fireplace was the piano, and on the other a bureau bookcase with a glass front. My mother never read and the contents of the glass-fronted case had not been changed, or touched probably, since my childhood: the blue and gold volumes of the Children's Encyclopedia bought and

paid for by instalments; the grim, brown *Home Doctor*, much thumbed and falling open automatically at the pages that had to do with dire prophecies of disease and death; miscellaneous books, bequeathed by aunts, won as school prizes or picked up at the jumble sale. *The Wandering Jew*. *Dombey and Son*. *Little Miss Vanity*. I looked round the room and thought how strange home-comings must be for children whose parents refurnish once they are grown; throwing out their childhood along with the worn chairs, the old books. . . .

There was no question of Jay going to an hotel. I suggested it half-way through the evening, when she had just finished one song and was searching through the pile of tattered sheets for another.

'Harriet would never forgive me,' she said, shocked. 'What an idea! Mr Henderson can have your bed, Tom, and you can make do with the sofa. You've got young bones.'

Suddenly she looked at Jay and frowned, as if something puzzled her. I thought: how old would Henderson be now, for heaven's sake? But then her face cleared and she turned back to the piano to sing 'Smilin' Through'.

*

Her good mood lasted through the night. Usually she drifted through the mornings in a kind of coma, not stirring until Miss Foley had done the fires and come to help her dress and do her hair. But today, for some reason, she was up before we were and made tea and eggs which we ate in the kitchen. She wore a red dressing-gown. Her long hair flowed down her back in a thick plait. She looked like a gay, elderly child.

She said good-bye to us, standing at the door of 'Dunro-

vin', in the blue, early morning light. She kissed me, and called me Bertie. She had forgotten me, but Jay was still Mr Henderson.

'Good-bye, Mr Henderson,' she said. 'Come again. Don't leave it so long, this time.'

'I would very much like to come,' Jay said.

'That's good.' Her face glowed. 'That's *good*. I shall look forward to it so much. You'll always have a welcome here.'

IT was a marvellous morning. Even though my bones ached from a cramped night on the sofa, I felt cheerful and refreshed. The sun glittered on the fallen snow and the air was dry, tingling in the nose like the air at a ski resort. Since the coastal road was tolerably empty at this time of the year and of the morning I let Jay drive; though he was sublimely confident of his skill in traffic, *I* was not. He drove with extraordinary verve and dash, rather as if he were driving a Dodgem car. His hands were clamped fiercely on the steering wheel, his lips emitted a low, humming sound. He hurled the car at the road with dare-devil courage; clearly, the landscape on all sides bristled with terrible dangers. The only other man I had ever known drive a car with such theatrical aggression was Reggie.

We negotiated a slippery bend in top gear with screaming tyres while I sat silent and dry-mouthed, refusing to think of the mechanical damage he was almost certainly causing. He swept into the straight at seventy miles an hour and said, on a deep, happy sigh, 'I think I should like to buy a car while I am in England.'

Like Reggie, he loved cars with passion: it should have been a bond between them.

'A car's not much use in London.'

'But I could go on trips to see the beautiful English countryside. And take Philip out from his school.' To my horror, he turned towards me. His voice rose in the plaintive tone of self-justification. 'It is not a school for the sons of poor men. He will be humiliated if his father does not have a car.'

'Look out.' We made a flamboyant, sweeping curve round an elderly cyclist.

'It's all right. I saw him,' Jay said in a hurt voice.

'How? Out of the back of your head?' I returned to his earlier remark. 'Philip's got too much sense to mind about that sort of thing.' I felt slightly uneasy. With Jay, I had discovered the wish for something was all too likely to lead to its rapid acquisition. In the short time he had been with us he had bought two suits, innumerable shirts and Italian ties; whisky for me, expensive flowers for Louise and Julia. I did not grudge him his pleasure in spending but in an odd way it depressed me: I did not like to see him seduced by toys. There was a shabbier reason, too. I was nervous of the effect his lavishness might have on others—Julia, for example. (*They are so irresponsible about money!*) Though Julia liked Jay, she also liked to be proved right. I could just see the cold, satisfied gleam in her eye if he should turn up with a car, however tinny and second-hand.

'You can't afford it, anyway,' I said shortly.

'I could buy it on the hire purchase. Of course, it would be necessary for someone to guarantee the payments.'

'Not me,' I said cheerfully.

He glanced at me sidelong, his face quite without expression. It was as if a stranger sat beside me.

He said, with cold dignity, 'I would never suggest that. I am told my Government will do this, in certain circumstances.'

If not an untruth, this was a misunderstanding of something someone had said to him. But it seemed best to say nothing. We sat in silence and I felt miserable; I had not meant to offend his pride.

We came onto a straight stretch of road. To the right, the

land fell gently away; in the distance, a pencil line against the great sweep of winter sky, was the white curve of the sea-wall.

I said, ingratiatingly, 'Over there – that's the Land of the King's Cows.'

Curiosity restored his good humour. He craned his neck to look and nearly took us off the road. I restrained myself with some difficulty from putting out a hand to the wheel. A herd of bullocks in a field near the road turned to stare at us as he righted the car.

'When you told me about it in Kenya,' he said, 'I had pictured it quite differently. A great, green valley – very rich and green.' He chuckled suddenly; I heard the sound with relief. 'But English cows are very fat,' he said. 'It has amazed me.'

*

We arrived late in London. It didn't matter; Jay had only one seminar, late in the morning, and my day was fairly free. Or should have been, since I had no lectures; but when I got to the college I found Hilton, my boss, was away sick. He had been due to appear on a discussion programme on the B.B.C. European Service; he had left a message with his secretary to say he had told them I would take his place.

It was like Hilton to leave me no option. He was a mild, stooping, reticent man with a shock of white hair that made him look more like a back-room scientist than any back-room scientist could possibly look. In fact, 'back-room' is misleading. He had worked most of his life abroad: at the research station in Malacca; with Fischbein in Java; and after the war, first with the F.A.O. in India and then in Israel, where he had produced his work on the morphology of carps of different genotypes. His appointment as head of the biology

department was regarded by most people as a form of honourable retirement, but not by him. He lived with his mother and grandmother in Peckham - even his mother was immensely old - but only his body travelled backwards and forwards there. His spirit resided permanently in the laboratory and in his cramped, untidy room at the university, surrounded by screwed up sweet papers, back numbers of *Hydrobiologica*, and notes for the two books he was writing; one on the therapy of bacterial fish diseases and the other a layman's book on nutrition and fish culture among primitive peoples. He lived for his work and assumed everyone else did so too, but in such a gentle, inoffensive way, that it was impossible to object. He was, I think, continually surprised to find himself regarded as eminent, or in any way an authority. He had been astonished when his recommendation had got me the F.A.O. job in Kenya and insisted that it was really the effect of an article I had had in *Science* on external parasites of fish. He was always honoured when anyone asked him to give an outside lecture or take part in a radio discussion; so honoured that he usually waived the fee. I wondered if he had done so this time but shrank from asking his secretary since Hilton's modesty about money - as acute as a Victorian lady's about her underclothing - infected everyone about him.

*

I telephoned Louise at midday to say I should be home in the afternoon to change and pick up some notes. Julia answered. She had just 'popped in' for coffee and stayed to do a little ironing. There was such an enormous pile and Louise looked 'so tired'. Our twice-weekly diary hadn't arrived; her husband was ill again.

'That'll save the gin,' I said. Mrs O'Connor was a charming, always beautifully turned-out but alcoholic Irishwoman who had buried three husbands and would shortly be burying the fourth. (This is no comment on her adequacy as a wife; she was just one of those women who are naturally attracted to the weak and ailing.)

'Oh, Tom – I'm sure she doesn't,' Julia said, righteously scoring me off for being uncharitable.

'Oh, yes, she does, old dear. Gin is mother's milk to her. *My gin*. Where's Louise?'

'What a shame, you've just missed her Reggie's in London, so I sent her off to have lunch with him. I thought it would be nice for her to have a little fun '

'Poor Louise, she has a hard life,' I said, but she didn't rise. This was unusual. She had said her piece about the pile of ironing and Louise being 'so tired' but the words hadn't carried the normal flavour of enjoyable rebuke. She had spoken them because they were in our script, as it were, but without much feeling or energy, like a tired actress. Perhaps she *was* tired, or depressed. It was possible that even Julia could sometimes be depressed.

I said, 'I hope you'll find yourself something to eat.'

'Don't bother about *me*. You know I don't eat more than a bird!'

'Boil yourself an egg, then. Will you be there when I come home? I'll be back around four. I've got to change.'

'Oh.' She paused and then said quickly, 'No, I won't be. I've got a bridge tea '

That's not true, I thought suddenly, not sure why since it might well have been.

She said, 'How's your mother, Tom?'

'Much as usual. She's never ill, you know.'

'Yes.' There was a pause. 'It must be rather a strain for you, this journey every week.'

I said warily, 'It's tiring, sometimes.'

'You've been a good son, Tom,' she said, almost as if she meant it, but her compliments always had a sting in the tail. 'I'm an interfering old woman, I know you'll say that, but wouldn't it be better, really, if she went into some nice place where she could be properly looked after? Better for *her*, I mean, as well as for you.'

I said nothing.

'Some of these places are really quite nice - just private houses with lovely gardens. And properly trained people to look after her. She'd be able to get out and about much more than she does now.'

'Have you been discussing this with Louse?'

'No. You know I wouldn't do that. She'd be angry because she'd think I was doing this for *her* sake. But Reggie and I did have a word this morning. That's why I'm mentioning it now. Reggie handles my money as you know, and some of my shares have gone up quite a lot. So I could manage to help you with the fees.'

'That's very kind of you, Julia. But it's not the money. As a matter of fact, Augustus once offered to get her into some Home for the unwanted relics of the professional classes. It was run by a charity he had to do with, so he was not only offering to step up my mother's social status but making sure it didn't cost us a penny.'

'I'm sure he meant it kindly, Tom,' she said reproachfully. 'He wasn't thinking of himself.'

'He was, in a way. Tidying up his family's affairs.'

'Of course, he was always very kind of Louise.'

'That's what I meant. The answer was "no" then. It still is.'

I shifted the telephone receiver from my right hand to my left. I was sticky with absurd, irrational anger.

She said, after a pause, 'Well, I'm sure you know best, Tom.'

She sounded so humble, so almost nervous that I felt sorry. She only wanted to help. It was just that her ideas weren't mine.

I said, 'Have a good time at your bridge tea. It's nice of you to help Louise out with the chores. I hope she enjoys her fleshpots with Reggie.'

'She will. You know, she doesn't find him quite so much of a grotesque as you do.'

This was more in her usual vein. I smiled as I replaced the receiver though afterwards I wondered why she had not pressed her point more forcefully. It was unlike her. Almost as if she were anxious to placate me.

*

At twelve o'clock I had an unexpected visitor. Georgiana, muffled to the eyeballs in musquash and clutching an enormous black handbag. She was waiting in the vestibule – not, of course, sitting on the leather-covered bench beneath the notice-board, that would have been too presumptuous – but standing against the wall, near the swing door. In spite of her rotundity, she had the air of a nervous, woodland creature, poised for flight at the first hostile movement.

As soon as she saw me, she started to apologize for her appearance. She was dreadfully sorry to bother me, she wouldn't keep me a minute, but she was on her way to the Tower of London (what for, I wondered wildly, looking at that kleptomaniac's handbag, to steal the Crown Jewels?), and she knew where I worked because Louise had once

pointed it out to her the day she came with her to buy a new costume at the Civil Service Stores and since she was passing she didn't think I'd mind. Hopelessly bogged down, she went crimson and blinked.

I said, 'Georgie, of course I don't mind. I'm delighted. You must have lunch with me.'

She was horrified. 'Oh, *no* Tom, I wouldn't dream - I mean it's very kind but I shall be quite all right, I usually have a little bite at Lyons - really, I wouldn't have come at this time if I'd thought-

'Of course not.' Whoever would imagine that Georgiana would invite herself anywhere? 'I'd love you to have lunch with me. Honestly.' I steered her out through the door, keeping a tight hold on her elbow. 'Where would you like to go?'

'I don't know. Oh, Tom, I really can't

'Where do you usually lunch?'

'Lyons - or an A.B.C.'

'With Augustus, I mean.'

She looked surprised. 'Oh, I never meet Augustus in town.'

'Why not?'

She looked at me shyly. 'We never have - Augustus doesn't like it.'

I hailed a taxi, bundled her in and, a bit to my own surprise, gave the name of a rather expensive restaurant; small, not too smart, but where I knew there was a dessert trolley laden with ice-cream and rich, gooey cakes. I guessed that would be the sort of thing she liked.

It was. She looked round with unaffected pleasure as I helped her out of her awful, shapeless coat and settled her on a plushy, crimson bench against the wall. I ordered her a large, sweet sherry; she sipped it and beamed at me. 'This is

lovely, Tom. The sort of place I've never dared to go into by myself, because of the waiters.'

Her maiden-aunt innocence was sweet, slightly saddening. It made me feel magnanimous. It was a feeling I would have expected Augustus to enjoy.

I said curiously, 'What did you mean when you said Augustus didn't like meeting you in London? Is he always so busy?'

'Well - yes, he is, of course. He has to entertain business people. But it isn't that.'

She took off her glasses and wiped them on a corner of the atrociously patterned silk scarf she wore round her neck, blinking at me myopically. Her lashes were ridiculously long and curly; uncovered, her eyes looked shy and defenceless.

'Come on,' I coaxed. 'Tell me.'

'It's just that - in the beginning, you see, he didn't want to. He was frightened we might meet Julia when we were together. He didn't know what he would say to her, I think. It really did worry him terribly. He said she might be anywhere - any restaurant or theatre or cinema. So of course, in the end, we never went anywhere.'

This seemed an interesting sidelight on Augustus. 'Did it worry you? That you might meet Julia, I mean?'

'No. Only because it worried Augustus. It really did. He used to lie awake and think about it at night. It seemed sort of funny to me. I mean in the office he'd always seemed so . . . so. . . .'

Her voice died away. She sat looking at her soup with a perturbed expression. Then she said, 'One of the reasons I came to see you Tom - I should have explained - was because I wanted you to ask Mr Nbola if I could take little Philip out on Sunday. Augustus says he'll drive me to the school, if

I like. He's got a friend who belongs to a golf club quite near and he could have a game and I could take Philip out to tea.'

'I'm sure Jay would be delighted. You don't have to ask.'

Surely, she hadn't sought me out just for *that*? Perhaps the absurdity had occurred to her too: she gulped down the rest of her sherry and said quickly, 'He's such a dear little boy, isn't he? Do you know, he wrote me a little letter when he got back to school, saying thank you for the lunch and the skating. He called me Auntie Georgie. . . .'

We went on talking about Philip, as if we had no other subject in common. I ordered a bottle of wine with our main course and Georgiana drank her full share of it. Her cheeks became flushed.

She said suddenly, 'When I was a little girl, I wanted to be a children's nurse, but my mother disapproved. She was very ambitious, she wanted me to have a better chance, she said. She was a dressmaker - she'd gone to work in a garment factory when she was fourteen. Awful places they were then. She worked in a little room right up under the roof, stitching buttons to start with. She said it was terrible in summer - you sweated and you had to keep wiping your hands to keep the clothes clean. She wanted to be a dress designer - she went to the Tech. in the evenings for lessons - but then she had me, and she couldn't. She wanted me to get on instead. I used to have dancing lessons, ballet and tap, and then a neighbour said, why didn't I go on the ice? It caught Mum's fancy, I don't know why, and she took me to the rink one Saturday. I was about eight, then. Mum hired some skates and we went round once or twice and then I went on my own. I thought it was lovely, like flying. It was easy, too, I mean I

didn't fall over or anything. We went once or twice more and then one day a man came up to my mother and said I ought to be trained. He was one of the instructors. She said she couldn't afford it and he said he'd teach me for nothing. Mum was awfully pleased and we went a lot that summer. It was after that she got the idea I could be a big skating star.'

'Did you enjoy it?' I said softly. I had never heard her talk like this before. Was it the wine, or just that Augustus wasn't here?

'It was fun, at first. I mean Mum made me some pretty dresses and for a while the lessons were easy. But then they got harder and my muscles hurt. My back and my legs and ankles – that's what I remember most, after the beginning. Something was always hurting. Mum said I'd get used to it. She said skaters and dancers had to get used to pain. My Granny – we lived with her – said it would get better in time and she used to rub me with wintergreen. It didn't get better, though. It got worse, really. I was a terrible coward – I got so I hated the training and especially the competitions. I used to get a pain in my stomach before and I couldn't keep anything down. But I had to go on. Mum was so keen, she'd spent so much money on fees and the dresses and having my hair permed. I used to feel awful about all the money she'd spent. It was better when I got a job – I mean, the money side was better but the skating was worse. I got so tired. Mum used to meet me from the office and we'd go straight to the rink. The other girls laughed at that. They said she was afraid I'd get off with a boy. I think she was afraid of that a bit. She used to talk to me about boys. She said I must keep away from them, I'd got my career to think of. Though it wasn't just that, of course, it was partly because she . . . I

didn't dare tell her what I really wanted was to get married and have babies. . . .'

While she talked her voice slipped, rather like an ill-fitting dress borrowed for a special occasion, and became slightly common. No more common than mine, I hasten to add. I only mention it because it made all that she was saying more real. You could hear, in that flat, London voice, the thin, shy, underfed girl she must have been.

'Is your mother still alive?'

She shook her head. 'She died about ten years ago. I hadn't seen her after - after I left home. Augustus didn't want me to, but I should have - I blame myself, really. But one of our neighbours used to write, she wrote and said she had cancer. Augustus offered to pay for a private nursing home but she wouldn't have it. I went to see her once or twice, at the end, but she didn't know me. Perhaps it was just as well, perhaps Augustus was right, really. She was very straight, she thought what I'd done was terrible. But when I went - it seemed such a little thing to have kept away for, all those years. . . .'

I said, 'Did you think you and Augustus would get married?'

'Oh, yes.' She flushed. 'Mum had always brought me up - I mean, he'd *left* Julia. He thought she'd divorce him, that there wasn't any question. . . . Of course, when she didn't it didn't make any difference, except we couldn't have a baby.'

'You could have done, surely? Thousands do, in your position.' I grinned. 'Augustus is rich enough for it not to matter.'

'I would have done,' she said, surprising me. 'It wasn't as if - I mean, the baby would have had a father. And I didn't feel not married, really. I used to walk down the street - once

we'd moved out of London, I seemed to have so much time -- and look at the babies in the prams.' She hesitated, but only for a moment. I think she was more than a little drunk. She leaned across the table. 'Once, I took one, Tom. It was a dreadful thing. I just wheeled it down the street and round the corner. I didn't mean to take it away, I just wanted to hold it and cuddle it for a little bit. It was a very small baby, I meant to take it back quickly so it wouldn't be missed. But the woman came after me, she was shouting and crying and I saw what a cruel, wicked thing I'd done. I tried to say I was sorry but she called a policeman and he took me to the station. He was very kind, really, he gave me a cup of tea and later on Augustus came to fetch me. He -- he took me to a doctor, who was very nice, he told Augustus that there was nothing wrong with me except that I ought to have a baby of my own. After that, I thought Augustus would agree, but he didn't. He was angry with the doctor and said it would be a terrible thing to bring an illegitimate baby into the world. I didn't think it was so terrible, I mean we would have loved it and anyway I... But it wasn't any good my arguing, really. You see, what really worried Augustus, was what Julia would say.'

She blinked, as at the remembrance of pain, and I felt suddenly angry with Augustus, with Julia. As that last, bleak, sad, frightening sentence had shown, the tussle had, all along, been between *them*. *They* were the important people, the ones who counted, not this poor, gentle creature who, it seemed now, had merely inadvertently been present when the struggle between the two main protagonists was at its height. Of course Augustus had loved her, it would have been a point of honour with him to do so, but she was a minor character part, destined to be kept waiting in the wings while the main action took place on-stage.

She said, 'Augustus took me on holiday, after. We went to Greece. He was very kind.'

Then she looked at me, and said, 'I'm sorry. I shouldn't have talked to you like this.'

'Nonsense.'

'No, I mean it. I mean it was wrong. What would Augustus say?'

'My lips are sealed. I can't say,' I said and she giggled, just like a little girl.

It wasn't until I was putting her into the taxi that she said what she had really come to say. She leaned forward just as I was about to close the door.

'Wait a minute. Tom, Reggie came down last night. I thought you ought to know. . . .'

'Why, dear?'

'Well - it's just that - I don't suppose it matters - but Augustus . . .' She drew a deep breath and gabbled. 'They got to talking about Veronica. And, and Mr Nbola. And Reggie said - '

She stopped and looked at me nervously, checking the clasp of her handbag.

'I can guess what Reggie said.'

'It's so silly.'

'Irrelevant.'

'But I thought you ought to know. I mean, it would be terrible if he. . . .'

'Did he say he was going to do anything?'

'He - he said he was going to have a word with Louise. Find out the truth of it, was what he said.'

'*That* won't do any harm,' I smiled at her, relieved.

She said sadly, 'You don't think it was silly of me to come'
Only Reggie. . . .'

'I know Bless you for coming.' I kissed her soft cheek.
'Don't worry, Georgie, dear. There's nothing to worry about.
Louise'll give Reggie his come-uppance.'

9

I BELIEVED it. Even when I got home, at three-thirty, and found Reggie and Louise together in the sitting-room, I still believed it.

'Nice to see you, Reggie,' I said untruthfully as I walked in. 'What are you doing in town?'

I had that feeling—always unmistakable—that my arrival had broken off an intimate conversation. Both their faces were flushed with food and alcohol and unspecified guilt; both pairs of eyes had a dark, glittering look. Louise's met mine in a quick, sliding glance; almost at once she averted her gaze and fixed it, in pointed withdrawal, on the open door behind my head.

Reggie looked at me with lowered head. He was chewing on his fleshy underlip. 'I came to take My Daughter home,' he said with portentous emphasis, after a long, heavy-breathing pause. (This could not, originally, have been true, of course. In fact, as I found out afterwards, he had come to London for a couple of days on some business with a foreign drug firm. But like his mother, Reggie had an instinct for the dramatic which he could not resist indulging. Even when the dramatic was banal.)

I said innocently, 'Whatever for? I thought she was doing a secretarial course?'

'She *was*.' A further pause. More heavy breathing. 'It is extremely unfortunate that she cannot be allowed to continue it. But after what Louise has told me, I have no option but to remove her,' he said proudly and, I thought, excessively grammatically. He squared his heavy shoulders and

lifted his chin, completing the picture of a decent John Bull, doing his duty.

Louise gave me a quick, frightened look. Then she spread out her hands on her lap and examined her pink, polished nails.

I said, unbelievably, 'What exactly has Louise told you?'

Louise jerked her head up. Her hearing was more acute than mine; it must have been fully half a minute before I understood her hypnotized-rabbit look of paralysed horror. The front door opened, slammed. Jay called, '*Hodi* Hallo there!' I felt the fluttering of nausea in my stomach.

Louise said softly, pitcously, 'Please, Reggie. . . .'

But this was just the sort of situation that appealed to him. He had us all in his power.

He said loudly, 'That your friend here has been carrying on with my daughter.'

Louise said helplessly, 'Reggie, I didn't mean. . . .' She started to cry in a quiet, defeated way.

Jay was standing in the doorway of the room. I laughed loudly as if we had all been sharing some barrack-room joke and said, 'For heaven's sake, Reggie. This is all a lot of bloody nonsense, and you know it. That is, if Louise has been telling you the truth.' I looked at her. She gave a moan and turned her face away. I said, 'Naturally, Veronica has been seeing Jay. She has met him here with Julia. If they've met once or twice outside - for coffee, even for a visit to the *pictures* - what of it? What do you *think* has been going on?' I tried - and knew I had failed - to inject the right amount of surprised sarcasm into my voice.

'Mr Trim——' Jay began, but Reggie ignored him.

He smiled at me in an ostentatiously calm way, to show how reasonable he was. 'My dear, Tom, nothing, I hope. It

is simply a friendship I cannot approve of. Nor would Veronica's mother. I would have thought I could have relied on your discouraging it. Since I cannot, I am doing what any normal father would do — removing my daughter from an undesirable influence.'

'I object to the word, "normal",' I said.

'Do you? You aren't a father,' Reggie said. 'I can't expect you to know how a father feels.' He looked directly at Jay for the first time and said, 'Perhaps you can tell him?'

Jay's white teeth were showing in a kind of still smile of fear, or shame; he was incapable of answering. The expression on his face sickened me.

I said, 'If I had a daughter, I don't think I could bear to have such disgusting thoughts about her. Do you really see her as a bitch on heat?'

'I won't have my daughter mixing with Blacks,' he said steadily.

Humiliation burned up inside me. I had a terrible sense of failure. 'I would be grateful if you would leave my house,' I said.

Reggie shrugged his shoulders and picked up his overcoat from the chair.

Jay turned and left the room without a word. We heard his footsteps going up the stairs.

Reggie put on his coat and smoothed his pigskin gloves carefully over his large, hairy hands. They fitted him like his assurance. His voice held the easy contempt of the successful man. 'If you think I should apologize, Tom, I will. Though I must admit, I think I was considerably provoked.' He smiled: satisfaction with this little speech had made him more benign. 'Maybe I really should have restrained myself,' he said.

I was trembling and full of tiredness – the almost thankful exhaustion of knowing the hideous, ridiculous scene was almost over. I looked at the egg-shaped, white pouches under his eyes, the mournful, amorphous flesh. I said, in as conversational a tone as I could manage, ‘Reggie, you have the kind of face that looks as if it were painted on an ciderdown.’

He stared at me. As Louise gave a little shriek – half tears, half hysterical laughter – he went beet-red with vexation.

I said, ‘It’s not the sort of thing I should normally mention, of course. But I don’t see why you should be the only one to deplore other people’s offensive physical characteristics. At least you could do something about *yours*. You could go on a diet’

‘He’s mad,’ Reggie said, to the air. He moved, with surprising swiftness for such a big man, across the room and out into the hall. Louise darted after him. They talked in low voices. I gave them a couple of minutes and then stood on the hearth, my back to the fire, and bellowed as loud as I could. ‘And while we’re about it, Reggie, *if* I had a daughter I should loathe and detest the idea of her marrying *you*.’

The front door slammed in answer. I sat down on the sofa and put my head in my hands, pressing the knuckles into my eyes until the lids flamed vermillion.

Louise said, ‘Feeling better?’

I looked up. She was standing in front of me, her eyes bright in her blotched face. ‘My word, you do have fun,’ she said.

I repeated, very slowly, all the simple Anglo-Saxon words I could think of.

She said, ‘Do you hate me, Tom?’

‘No. I hate him. Not you. He’s a——’

‘You’ve said what he is.’ She gave a sad, half-smile. ‘And

if it comforts you, you've probably hurt him a lot. He knows he's ugly and overweight – you know, he always was, even at school. He was always sensitive about it.'

This gave me no satisfaction at all.

Louise said, 'It was all my fault. I didn't mean to do it. It was all because I was so angry yesterday. With you *and* with Jay. I didn't get over it. I didn't sleep all night. I didn't feel any better this morning. I'm not excusing myself, just explaining. Then, while we were having lunch, Reggie said he'd been down to Surrey and father had said Veronica had rather a crush on Jay and what did I think about it? He didn't sound particularly angry or anything, perhaps he was just being clever, I said I thought they were both rather smitten. I don't know why, I suppose I just wanted to make mischief. To get my own back partly, and partly to tease Reggie. I didn't really think he'd take it like that.'

'You should have known.'

'Yes. But he was being so nice – he *can* be nice, sometimes, you know. At least, I think he can.' She looked at me humbly.

I said, with a vague sense of shame. 'He's your brother. You don't have to apologize for finding him occasionally agreeable.'

'Then, when I saw how he felt – what I'd done – I thought I could talk him round. Reggie's not unreasonable, really, but you have to be awfully sly. I think I might have managed it if you hadn't come in then.'

'Perhaps you would.' There was no point in denying her this comfort.

'I wasn't expecting you.' Her face pinkered with shame and misery. 'Tom – I'm so sorry I don't know how it happened. I felt so ghastly. I was getting the curse. You know how it is.'

‘Yes.’ I stood up and she leaned against me, pressing her hot face against my shoulder. I patted her automatically, not feeling anything very much. ‘It’s all right, love. At least, as far as I’m concerned.’

She choked. ‘I can’t bear to speak to him.’

‘You’ll have to try.’

She pulled away and looked up at me pleadingly. ‘Please, Tom. Go and tell him I’m a bitch, anything you like. Only make it all right. *Please.*’

‘It’s a tall order. How would you feel if you were him?’

It struck me that Louise was singularly adept at evading the consequences of her actions. Her methods were the common feminine ones; tears, the parade of weakness, the appeal to a man’s pride. There was something almost professional, I thought, in the way she wrung her hands and said, in a low, stricken voice, ‘Please, Tom – I’m so ashamed.’

‘All right,’ I said. ‘I’ll do my best.’

*

Jay had his suitcase open on the bed. It was a cheap, flimsy affair, apparently made of some kind of brown cardboard. In the way that irrelevant details sometimes do, its shabbiness moved me to pity and then to overwrought anger. For God’s sake – there was nothing pitiful about a cheap suitcase. I had had plenty.

I said, ‘What the bloody hell do you think you’re doing?’

‘I shall find lodgings. I cannot stay here.’

‘Don’t be a bloody fool.’ I drew a deep breath. ‘It’s been bad enough having to put up with that fat oaf shooting his mouth off without you making silly meaningless gestures. You’re not a child – or a woman in pod. Why should you care what that fat, ignorant fool says? Ignore him – that’s

the only thing to do with fools. If you don't, you play into their hands. Don't you see, he'd be tickled to bits if he thought he'd driven you out."

He listened with an expression of sulky misery. 'I am not going because of what Dr Trim has said. I am used to insults.' He bared his teeth. 'Though it is difficult not to be an over-sensitive nigger if you are one. But I'm going because it's clear to me that I have brought unhappiness into your family. This is a terrible thing to me. You have been my good friend.' (I was more hurt than I would have believed possible by that past tense.) 'This is a terrible way to repay you. If I stayed here, it would only mean more trouble between you and your brother.'

I said, 'He's not my brother. You know damn well that if Reggie never walked into my house again I'd feel nothing – nothing at all except an overwhelming relief.'

He looked deeply shocked. 'That cannot be true. Your family must be important to you. To you and to Louise.'

'You are much more important to us both,' I said. At once, this sounded false and cheap.

Jay did not answer; he began to fold a suit carefully, turning the jacket inside out and arranging the sleeves like a tailor.

I said, 'Where will you go, anyway? Lodgings are expensive. Even if you find somewhere, what will you do in the holidays? You can't look after Philip in a bed-sitter.'

'I will arrange something,' he said, almost haughtily, making me feel interfering and paternalistic. He looked at me and his expression changed. 'Please don't worry, Tom. You have done a lot for me and I am really grateful. It has meant so much, to be received here, in an English home. When I first arrived, it was a constant marvel to me – here I am, I

thought, a black boy from the bush behaving just like a civilized gentleman.'

'Oh, shut up,' I muttered, but Jay's sudden giggle reassured me. He was simply amused by his own candour.

I looked at my watch. There was barely time to get to the studio for the rehearsal. I said hastily, 'Look, I've got to go. Be a good chap and hang on 'till I get back, at least. We'll thrash it out tonight, if we have to. It's unimportant nothing. A storm in a teacup.'

I saw that Jay didn't understand the expression but there was no time to explain it.

*

It was hot in the studio, we had to speak carefully and slowly for the benefit of a foreign audience and, perhaps as a result, the discussion barely got beyond a recital of those picturesque but basically meaningless statistics – (a child dies of hunger every three seconds, about the time it takes you to sprinkle salt over your Christmas dinner; the price of three packets of cigarettes will buy a hundred Arab refugees a quarter of a pint of milk daily for a month, and so on.) I wondered who worked out these homely images and whom they were expected to impress? The people who suspected the photographs of the dead in Belsen of being fake? (Could they have been real to anyone who didn't recognize a face among them?)

I watched the clock; afterwards I came out into the bitter cold and had to run for my bus. I caught it just before it moved off. I wasn't the last; a man swung himself onto the platform behind me. The Jamaican conductor waved me inside and said, to him, 'Sorry, sir. We're full up.'

He waited, his hand to the bell. The man didn't move. He

was tall, square-shouldered and wore a belted raincoat.

The Jamaican said, 'I can't take any more. I'm sorry.'

'What damned nonsense,' the man said quietly. His voice was sub-genteel, his brown eyes hot in his brown face. In spite of his civilian clothes, there was a bristling, military efficiency about him.

'We're only allowed five standing passengers,' the Jamaican said, equally quietly. 'It is the regulation. I'm afraid I must ask you to get off the bus, sir.'

'Ask away,' the man said with apparent good humour. 'It won't have any effect, that's all.' He smiled at the nearest passengers, seeking a flattering response to his piercing wit. One or two did smile, weakly.

The conductor said, 'I'm afraid I shall have to hold up the bus until you do leave, sir. I'm sure you don't want to inconvenience the passengers.'

'I'm a passenger, aren't I?' He thrust out his pointed chin as if brandishing a weapon. 'You're just being bloody high-handed, that's what.'

The conductor said, more curtly, 'I have to abide by the regulations. I'm in charge of this bus.'

The man laughed. 'Gone to your head, has it? It's always the same. A little brief authority. Flat-nosed bastards.'

Someone said from the depth of the bus. 'Oh, lay off. Some of us want to get home tonight.'

The man's jaw tightened. He jabbed his hand quickly towards the bell. The Jamaican caught his wrist and said, 'If you don't leave at once, sir, I shall have to call a policeman.'

The man wrenched his hand away and shouted, 'All right. All right. I shall report you - you've no right to manhandle passengers. You'll be for it, then. You see.'

He swung off the bus and walked rapidly away. The Jamaican pressed the bell and the bus moved off. He came into the aisle to collect the fares, his face expressionless. Tiny droplets of sweat were visible on his forehead.

A fat woman with short legs – her little feet bobbed several inches above the floor – said, ‘Don’t worry your ’ead about *him*. Silly bugger.’

He nodded without arguing; the tired sulkiness on his young face won him no more supporters. Though the fat woman said, her gaze sweeping the bus, ‘Uppity bugger’, eyes were fixed on the ground. She shifted her plastic shopping bag on her lap and muttered; when the conductor came back to her end of the bus she beamed consolingly at him, a fat, motherly smile. He ignored it; though you could hardly blame him, this seemed a pity and I felt sorry for her. For the rest of the journey he stood on the platform, staring sullenly out at the dark, wet, alien streets.

*

The silly incident depressed me. It was too trivial to be a spur to a healthy, cleansing bout of anger; I descended into a bleak depression as cold and dull and infinite as a grey Sunday, in which the world was full, not of wickedness or evil – nothing so grand – but of stupid and unattractive people behaving unattractively and stupidly. Starving children, destitute old men, out-of-work doctors (and the clueless, decent men who believed them to be idle layabouts) war refugees (and upright politicians who could talk about war without envisaging their own children mutilated and screaming) persecuted minorities, negroes in America, Jews in Russia, Indians in Africa – the waste and terror over three-quarters of the earth was due to nothing except a monstrous, inflated

stupidity, lack of imagination and fear; the innocent fear of savages, white and black, dreading the unknown.

I felt cold and tired and emptied. When I got home, Louise met me at the door. She looked flushed and very pretty as she usually did when on the defensive.

Julia was in the sitting-room.

Jay had gone.

'I couldn't do anything, Tom. He'd got all his things in the hall before he came to say good-bye.'

I went slowly upstairs to his room. It was as empty as it had been when he moved into it.

'I told you he took everything,' she said. Her manner was both nervous and smug. 'I nearly told him it was jolly rude of him to go before you got back, but it seemed a waste of time.'

'It would have been.'

Julia, sitting comfortably by the fire in a new green dress, nodded cosy approval.

'You can't expect Them to understand the little niceties of polite behaviour. Though I expect he *was* very upset. Reggie is a naughty, tactless boy.'

I could think of no answer to this stunning remark.

She sighed and smiled at me brightly. 'I suppose all's well that ends well. You and Louise have nothing to reproach yourselves with. You gave him a good start. But it's probably a good thing he's gone now. After all, it couldn't have gone on.'

'Why not?'

She let out a little laugh. 'Well - could it? I mean, he couldn't have stayed here for ever.'

'I wasn't expecting him to. Only for a year.'

'Don't be silly, Mother,' Louise said impatiently. 'You

know quite well it's a frightful thing. How would *you* like it if Reggie had been abominably rude to a guest in your house?'

'Don't you think you're exaggerating a little, dear?' Julia said in a gentle, superior voice. 'After all, Reggie had a perfect right to be worried. We mustn't get things out of proportion, must we? I'm only anxious you and Tom shouldn't blame yourselves. After all – it was very generous of you to offer to have him in the first place. No one could have expected you to keep him for a *whole year*. To speak bluntly, *I* don't think it a good thing for a young married couple to have a third person always in the house.'

'We've been married twelve years, Julia.'

'You're still a young couple to *me*.' She fitted a cigarette into her holder and assumed a wise, summing-up expression. 'No – I'm afraid I can't be sorry he's gone, really. Except personally, of course. I must admit I enjoyed his company. I always enjoy meeting people who are a little different. You tend to get set in your ways as you grow older – though I've tried very hard not to. My mother always used to say, you get out of life what you put into it, you should never refuse a challenge or a new relationship. I've remembered her advice all my life. I like to think I've tried to follow it.'

Her conversation struck me as more inconsequential and irrelevant than usual.

I said, 'Has Reggie really taken Veronica home?'

'Yes.' Her voice became extremely vivacious. 'Again – though I'm *very* fond of my only granddaughter, I can't say I was sorry. She's a sweet child but not over-gifted with grey matter and to tell you the truth I found her the least bit tedious after a bit. I don't think she was doing too well at

her secretarial place either it was a mad notion in the beginning. Too many smart, debby girls. I told Reggie he'd do better to get her into some good technical college in Nottingham where everyone's liable to be a bit more down-to-earth and hard working.'

'Did you know she was meeting Jay?' I said. 'Didn't you even try to make Reggie understand how unimportant it was in the sense he would mean, anyway.'

She widened her flirtatious, violet-coloured eyes at me.

'My dear, Tom, I was quite in the dark.' Her eyes flickered a little; she knew I knew she was lying. She said, on a little spurt of exaggerated laughter, 'Veronica may not be very bright about some things but she's certainly bright enough to pull the wool over her poor old Granny's eyes.' This Alice-Through-The-Looking-Glass image appealed to her, apparently, because she went on, 'And *no*, Tom. I didn't try to make Reggie understand. I'm too old for emotional scenes, I haven't the stamina for them I used to have.' She shook her head sadly, with a sigh. I looked at her wonderingly. She must be feeling miserably nervous and guilty if she was driven to pleading old age and infirmity. The pathos of the subterfuge made it impossible to expose her.

I said, 'No, I suppose not,' and grinned.

She smiled back uncertainly for a moment.

We said no more about it. While Louise made coffee and sandwiches, we talked about the weather and she asked me about my broadcast. But later, when she was getting ready to go - she always preceded her fussy preparations for departure with a little sigh, as if life were too much, and the words, 'Well, I suppose I must be getting my hat, stick and gloves,' - she suddenly said in a strained, unnatural voice, 'You've got a nice husband, Lou.'

This unsolicited testimonial embarrassed us all extremely. Louise said, 'Oh, *Mother*.'

I kissed Julia good-bye at the door with genuine affection, embracing not just her but all inefficient, hopeless, well-intentioned people. Her cheek felt powdery and soft and old. As I watched her to the gate – she would never let me drive her home but always insisted on picking up a taxi from the rank at the end of the road – it struck me for the first time that she was walking like an old woman, with that careful, thin-legged, heron's gait.

When I got back to the fire, Louise said, 'What's got into *her*?' in a perfectly friendly, amused voice : for some reason, I resented it.

'Ashamed, I daresay. Or feeling her age.'

'Umm.' She lifted her flushed face – she always sat too close to the fire. 'You know, Tom, it'll be nice, in a way, to be on our own again, won't it?'

She looked at me pleadingly : I resented that too. She was asking me to let her off, as Julia had done – between them, they made me feel like some remorseless taskmaster so that everything could be nice and cosy and comfortable again. We were to sit by the fire and say it was all for the best, while Jay was out in the cold. I wondered where.

I said, 'I thought you enjoyed having him here.'

'Oh, I did,' she said eagerly. 'But it's not the same, is it?' She paused, watching me closely, a cozening expression on her face like a child asking for sweets. Then she said, 'Will you miss him very much?'

'I don't know. I gather you won't. I hadn't realized you regarded him as an intruder.'

'I didn't.' She sat back on her heels and looked at me with a queer intensity as if meditating some course of action. But

all she did was too sigh, suddenly, and get to her feet. I think I'll go to bed,' she said.



I sat on by the fire. Julia's sweet, helpless silliness had lifted me momentarily out of depression. Now I was back in it again, in a grey desert of boredom, the cold fog of failure. Not that I had failed in anything very much because I hadn't tried to do anything very much. I hadn't tried to champion the cause of underprivileged people or bring about the brotherhood of man. (What brothers, anyway, Cain and Abel?) I had only tried to make a friend of a different sort of human being – whose difference was not in himself but in how other people saw him. But failure in a small thing can leave as sour a taste in the mouth as failure in a big one

I felt miserably inadequate. A naive nit



Before I went to bed I wrote a letter to the London Passenger Transport Board.

It was a short letter. I might have made it longer, working off some of my frustration and bad temper with myself, if the fire had not died down and the room grown cold.

I wrote, 'The conductor behaved with dignity and forbearance throughout, though he was extremely provoked.'

I signed it, put it into the envelope and then into my pocket.

Some weeks later, when she sent my suit to be cleaned, Louise found it there.

THE letter came six days later. It contained three fat envelopes and a single sheet, from Jay. It was addressed from the London School of Economics. It read :

My very dear friend,

You will have been out of your mind with worry as to my whereabouts. I write to bring you comfort. I should have written before but I have been overwhelmingly engaged in finding somewhere to lay my head. I resided temporarily with my friend Thomas Okapi whom you may remember from the airport, but I have now discovered quite good lodgings with an agreeable, though rather strange lady and gentleman. At first I was not allowed to cook in my room here but I have now gained my 'uhuru' and am allowed a gas ring. Later, when my financial affairs are in order, I shall hope to invite you for a 'celebration' in my simple quarters. Until that happy day, I must bury myself in my too-neglected work. I enclose three letters of which I have only opened the first. They come from your young niece. In the circumstances, I feel I should not acknowledge them.

I must tell you I have not found any friends your equal in Britain. Your sincere friend in the Lord, as Mr Chirk would say, Jason Nbola.

'It's an odd letter,' Louise said, frowning. 'So stiff and funny, not like him.'

'I daresay it was a difficult one to write.' I almost snatched the letter back from her and stuffed it in my pocket. She

looked faintly surprised. I said quickly, 'What about these letters from Veronica?' The envelopes were very fat and addressed in a large, green-inked scrawl. 'I suppose the poor child sent them to L.S.E. to stop our getting hold of them.'

'Poor child!' Louise said with a snort. 'Really, Tom -- can't you see she's just embarrassing him? I think he's very sensible to send them to us.' Her eyes rested on the envelopes. 'Oughtn't we to see what she says?'

I was shocked. 'Certainly not.'

She said longingly, 'I mean, if we did, we'd know what to do.'

'The answer to that is, nothing. It's the kindest thing.'

She sighed. 'I suppose so.' Unusually for her, so early in the morning -- we were having breakfast -- she lit a cigarette. Looking at me through wreaths of grey smoke, she said hesitantly, 'Do you think he's all right, Tom?'

She looked more animated, more interested and alive, than she had done since Jay had left. For most of the week she had been subdued and silent. If she was enjoying being 'just the two of us' it was in a very quiet, contemplative way. I assumed she was feeling -- quite properly in my view -- depressed about her behaviour to Jay and I had not felt inclined to cheer her up. I was depressed myself, resentful towards her, I suppose, and now, both hurt and angry. Jay's letter was like a slap in the face. Why had he not put his address? Did he mean to cut himself off completely? Did our friendship mean so little to him?

'I don't see why not,' I said. 'It'll do him good to get out on his own. He ought to spend more time with other students. They're less likely to think they're so bloody grand and noble in being friends with him.'

She flushed and stubbed out her cigarette. Drawing pat-

terns with a match in the ash-tray, she said slowly, 'I hope his lodgings are all right.'

'I don't see why they shouldn't be. I expect he'll find a commercial arrangement is better than a friendly one. He won't have to be grateful. He can live his own life, invite friends, give parties.'

'He could have brought his friends *here*.'

'He didn't though, did he? And – let's be honest – would we have wanted Mr Okapi? Except that it might have made us feel so comfortably nice and generous.'

'Tom, *don't*.' Her eyes filled up slowly with tears. 'Don't hurt yourself.'

'It's just pride,' I said. Suddenly, I didn't feel resentful towards her any more; the gentleness of her tone had converted all my bitterness into a pleasurable sadness. I said, 'I didn't really think he'd try to cut us out just like this.'

'It's not just pride,' she said stoutly. 'It's not just pride when someone you like and trust let's you down.'

'He hasn't let us down,' I objected. 'You're talking as if he'd walked off with the spoons, or something.'

She said obstinately, unsmiling, 'He must know you'd be upset if he didn't tell you where he was living.'

'Not necessarily. He might think we'd prefer it that way. It's a form of politeness, of not forcing himself on us. He thinks he's caused trouble in our family and that's important to him, he's sure it must be important to us. As long as we don't know his address we have an excuse if we want to avoid him.'

Though this seemed tortuous reasoning, it was quite probable he had thought like that. The only trouble was, I simply couldn't believe it.

'I suppose so.' Louise looked at me sadly. 'But we don't

know, do we? I mean – he's sweet and nice, *I'm* fond of him too, remember but we don't really know how he thinks and feels, do we? It's part of his attraction, of course. Getting to know him is rather like learning a new language. It's exciting at first, just to be able to talk to people, but then you find you aren't good enough to say anything important.'

She looked suddenly, with her fair skin shining and unpowdered, her shy, uncertain air, almost heartbreakingly young. I smiled at her and she got up and put her arms round me – a gesture with no sex behind it, only a rather strenuous desire to comfort.

'Tom, I'm so *sorry*,' she said in an urgent, breathless voice. 'It *matters* to you, doesn't it?' She looked at me with frowning thoughtfulness. 'It's odd, you know. You're so cautious and standoffish about people most of the time and yet – and yet, you suddenly go overboard for someone like Jay.'

'I didn't go overboard for him. I simply liked him.'

'Because he's African?'

'It's got something to do with it. But only because he seems a more straightforward person as a result – less muddled and confused and *worked over* than we are. But maybe you're right. Maybe it is like learning a new language. You miss all the subtleties.'

I didn't really believe this. At least, I believed it, but it was a glib simplification that left out everything important. Everyone is a new language. The fact that you may share certain common experiences with your own countrymen only obscures the gulf that separates you from them: people living in the same street inhabit different worlds. Was Jay any more difficult to know than the Misses Doone with their mad, merry religion? What would Reggie, for example, have thought of *them*?

Louise kissed my cheek 'Poor Tom,' she said with a gusty sigh.

Her sympathy embarrassed me. My hurt was too trivial and childish – I was ashamed to admit to it. It was simply ridiculous to feel I had been made use of and tossed aside when no longer needed. All right – I had been a fool, elevating my friendship with Jay to an absurdly high-flown sentimental level, like a simple-hearted boy scout. But this was the kind of folly you prefer to keep hidden, like an undignified physical ailment. Louise's sigh and her 'poor Tom', grated; rather as if I had a sore toe and she was insisting on treating it like some dangerous disease, tiptoeing round the sick-room with gentle, large-eyed concern.

'Don't be daft, woman,' I said. 'My heart's not broken. It's far too tough and stony an organ. Don't worry about him, either. He'll be back if he ever wants a free meal, I dare say.'

'Don't you *mind*?' she said reproachfully.

I grinned at her woebegone face 'Up to a point, my duck. But I've got my living to earn.'

*

Hilton said, 'I saw Jan Kunz, of the Fisheries Biology Division last night. He's in London for a couple of weeks. You'll be pleased to hear they were quite impressed with your report. Quite impressed.'

His eyes, those aimiable blobs of pale jelly, almost disappeared in the soft creases above his bunched-up cheeks, as he smiled. His plump face was like a rubbery doll's; it contrasted oddly with his rangy body and stark white hair. 'Though he thought maybe you shouldn't have laid so much stress on the public health angle. Governments, for some

reason, are less keen on reducing mortality than they are on feeding the people who survive.'

'It seemed a point worth making, though. You'd be introducing two fish that grow quickly to a large size and reducing bilharzia and malaria along the way.'

'It's just a matter of presentation,' he said apologetically. 'I think you should talk to Kunz.'

'I'd like to.'

'It would be useful on all counts. He's a chum of the U.N. Technical Assistance Board in Kenya. And incidentally' - he fiddled with his pencil, flicking it across the table and rolling it back - 'Kunz wondered, if the scheme was accepted, if you'd like to be taken on as project team leader for its implementation. He couldn't promise anything definite, of course, but if you were interested, it might be a good idea to catch his eye at this juncture.'

'I don't know,' I said slowly.

'It might suit you.' He smiled in a kindly way. 'Field work has a kind of moral simplicity you don't get in teaching.'

I laughed. 'I'd like it for myself.'

'Family?' He asked with delicate caution. He never intruded on other people's private lives. It struck me, that for all he knew, I might have ten children.

'My mother's the only problem,' I said. 'I'm an only child.'

He gave a little half-sigh; there was a tie he recognized.

'Think about it.' He paused. 'By the way didn't you have a young Kenyan living with you?'

'Yes. He's left now.'

'Ah. . . .' He grinned. 'That explains it. We've been receiving rather curious telephone calls from Africans who seem to think we have a room vacant. Presumably it is you they are after. The most persistent is a gentleman called

Okapi who apparently telephoned here and asked for the Director. Our Miss Porter gave him my home number. He seems to have spread it around.'

'I'm sorry. I'd no idea——'

'That's all right. Only if you see him, you might drop a word, would you? My mother's quite nervous of going out, in case a black man rises up from the hedge.'

'I'll do my best.'

'Thank you.' He unwrapped a toffee and popped it into his mouth. He sucked thoughtfully for a moment. 'I'll get onto Kunz, then. Sort out your family obligations a bit before you meet him, if you can.'

'I'll do my best about that, too,' I said.

*

I answered the telephone in the hall.

Veronica said, 'Is that you, Uncle Tom?'

'Yes.'

'Are you busy? I mean, can you *talk*? I've been wanting to get you for ages but this is the first time They've gone out.' Her voice was strained and hoarse as if she were getting over a bad cold.

'Carry on,' I said.

It was early evening. Louise was dishing up supper; a sour smell of cabbage filled the hall.

'Have you heard from Jay?' Veronica's voice rose in a breathy wail. 'I've written to him and he hasn't answered. I can't bear it, waiting and waiting. . . . I sent the letters to L.S.E. Do you think he hasn't had them?'

I said cravenly. 'It's possible. But anyway, I expect he's very busy. He works hard, you know, and he's been looking for somewhere to live.'

'I know. Daddy said – he said he'd got rid of him for you. Wasn't that an absolutely foul, unspeakable thing to say? I hate Daddy. I wish he were dead.'

She burst into tears. Awful, heaving, gasping sobs emerged from the receiver. I gave the kitchen door a furtive shove with my foot and made ineffectual, soothing noises. After a moment, she appeared to be blowing her nose. She said gaspingly, 'I'm sorry I didn't mean to make a fool of myself. It just comes over me all the time. I've been lying on my bed all afternoon and crying. Uncle Tom – do you think he'll answer my letters?'

'It wouldn't be very sensible of him if he did.'

'Why not?' she said indignantly. 'I put my friend's address so he could write there. *Her* parents never look at her letters. So Daddy wouldn't know.'

'That's not the point, love. I don't think he'll write. He's a married man with children, remember?'

There was a silence, pregnant with misery. She said in a light, undimensional voice, 'I wish *I* were dead.'

This seemed healthy and normal. She went on, wistfully, 'Uncle Tom – have you got a photograph of him?'

'No. And if I had, I wouldn't send it to you. Look, love, be sensible——'

'Be sensible, be sensible,' she mocked bitterly. 'That's what *they* keep saying. I didn't think you would, though. I thought you'd understand. I didn't think you'd be on Daddy's side.'

'I'm not really. But I'm beginning to think he was right in taking you home.'

'*He* treats me as if I was a Fallen Woman or something. He goes on and on as if he'd rescued me from a life of vice. Well – I'll tell you something. I'm beginning to wish he *had* – then it would be worth it. At least I'd have had something. I

wish I'd been his *mistress*. I wish I was having his *baby*. That would serve Daddy right - if I had a black baby.'

'My dear child, any baby would be a disadvantage.'

She started to cry. I pictured her, lying on her stomach on the bed and weeping noisily into the telephone receiver. What would she be wearing? A blouse and skirt? A gown, all nylon and lace? A little to my regret, the idle speculation produced no flicker of sexual interest. Her pathetic, declared passion had had the effect of reducing her, irrevocably, to childhood. I felt sorry for her, irritated with her and angry with Reggie. Surely to God, he could have handled her better than this?

She said, dolefully sniffing, 'When you see Jav, Uncle Tom, will you tell him one thing for me?'

'It depends what it is.'

'Oh, don't *worry*. It's nothing embarrassing. It's just that I've been thinking things over and I've decided I'm going to be a nurse. *He* thought it was a good idea. *He* didn't think I was frivolous and silly and stupid and not able to stick to anything.'

'I'll tell him,' I said gently. 'You know, I don't think you're silly and frivolous, either. . . .'

She said, with cold dignity, 'I don't care what you think any more.'

'I'm sorry.'

There was a pause. Then she said in a small, distant voice, 'I'm sorry, too. I didn't mean to be rude.'

'I don't mind if it makes you feel better.'

'It doesn't really. I've been monstrously rude to Daddy and it hasn't helped. I don't blame him for making me come home, I mean it was mad, but I suppose I can understand *that*. It's all the other things - the things he says. About people just

down from the trees, *you* know. Of course he's absolutely bonkers, I mean he's stark raving, you should hear him. You don't know what it's been like here, Uncle Tom.'

'I can guess.'

'It makes you feel — oh, I don't know. As if you want to go and be a missionary or work in a leper colony. Or — or rush out into the street and throw your arms round every black man you see and say I'm sorry for being a white person.'

'That's not an impulse I should give way to, if I were you. It would hardly help your personal situation.'

'Don't laugh.'

'I'm sorry. I think I do know how you feel.'

'It makes you feel so — *dirty*.'

'I know it,' I said.

..

Louise said, 'Julia's coming round this evening.' She looked at me with an odd gleam in her eye. 'She went to see Philip on Sunday.'

'That was nice of her. What made her do that?'

'I gather she was feeling bad about Jay. Reparations or something.'

'Nothing wrong in that,' I stopped. 'Oh! Oh, my God.'

Louise gave a deep sigh. 'So you *did* know Georgie was going. Mother said. . . .' She speared a potato. 'It might help, Tom, if — just occasionally — you told me what you'd been up to.'

'I just didn't think. Oh, my God.'

She said, with asperity, 'For heaven's sake don't sit there gaping. Like one of your wretched fish deprived of oxygen or something.'

'I'm sorry.' I closed my mouth. 'What happened.'

She shrugged her shoulders. 'She didn't say much. Only that they'd met there.'

'Augustus?' I said, horrified.

She shook her head. 'Luckily, no.' Suddenly, she giggled. 'It must have been rather funny, really.'

'Do you think so?' I said.

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'It was rather ridiculous,' Julia said. 'I didn't realize at first who she was. As a matter of fact, I thought she must be some kind of official – something to do with the British Council, perhaps. One of those deedy women. Then Philip called her Auntie Georgie. . . '

'What did you say?' Louise asked.

'I can't really remember, dear. Something like, "I'm afraid we haven't met. . . ." She was wearing an awful old coat – like a mangy yak – and a sort of pudding basin with felt violets on it, and the most extraordinary shoes.'

'That sounds like Auntie,' Louise said.

'I would have thought Augustus would have had better taste.'

They both laughed, loudly. Then there was silence. It was very uncomfortable, like an amateur stage show in which everyone has forgotten their lines.

Louise cleared her throat. 'What did you do?'

'Do? What could we do? We both took him out to tea – after all, I couldn't take him and leave her standing there, could I? We had a very nice tea in the hotel. It was raining, so afterwards we played snakes and ladders. She had brought snakes and ladders with her.'

'Oh, Mummy, it must have been so *funny*.' Louise laughed till the tears came.

'It was hilarious,' Julia said.

'What did you *call* each other, for heaven's sake?'

'We called each other by our first names. Anything else would have been too embarrassing.' Julia's skin was stretched tautly over her bones. Her face looked like an old mask that had been dried out in the sun.

'I suppose it would,' Louise said. 'Will you have sugar, Mrs Trim? No, thank you, Mrs Trim.'

Her face was suffused, her eyes streaming. I could have shaken her till her teeth rattled.

'The situation was ludicrous,' Julia said. 'Two *old* women. Old women should not have emotions.'

'Neither of you are old,' Louise said. She got up and offered her mother a cigarette.

Julia took one from the box and put it between her lips without using her filter.

Louise lit it for her.

Then she said, 'Would you like a cup of tea, Mum?'

'If you'd like to make one, dear.'

Louise jerked the door open too quickly and banged her forehead. She gave a startled cry and burst into tears. Julia and I got up at once and went towards her but she backed away, scarlet.

'It's all right, don't fuss. I just wasn't expecting it, that's all.'

She gasped, and galloped into the kitchen.

Julia looked at me uncertainly, 'Tom?'

'Yes?'

Her mouth tightened as if it had been jerked taut by a piece of string.

'Do you think I should divorce Augustus?'

'Because you've met Georgie? No, I —'

'Not altogether. I mean, not just for her sake.' She gave me a nervous look. 'I was so ashamed,' she said. 'More ashamed than ever in my life. It was as if I'd suddenly come face to face with myself and seen someone quite different. A silly, vindictive, old woman.'

'You're not vindictive.'

'No. Just thoughtless. I'd never thought before. Not of her. As a person, I mean. She was just Augustus's bit. I can't think why Augustus didn't tell me the sort of person she was. Perhaps I wouldn't have listened, though. Perhaps she was different then.' She looked at me hopefully. 'Was she ever pretty, do you think?'

'I should think she probably was,' I lied. 'She was a skating star.'

She let out her breath slowly. The lines on her face plumped out and she looked younger. 'Augustus never could resist a pretty face. It wasn't sex, though. That's what surprised me, when he went off. I couldn't believe . . . I mean it was only through perseverance that Reggie and Louise. . . .' She stopped and then said in a suddenly loud voice, 'Just like posting a marshmallow in a letter-box.' She looked at me slyly. 'Have I embarrassed you?'

I shook my head.

'Well, I've embarrassed myself. I never thought I'd say *that* to anyone.' She stubbed out her half-smoked cigarette; her fingers were trembling. 'I used to long to say it to Augustus. Oh - the nights I lay awake, saying spiteful, vulgar things aloud, in the dark! For years after he left. . . .'

Her colour rose vividly. 'I'm a disgusting old woman, Tom. And spiteful, as I said. I hated him for what he'd done, to me and to the children - Reggie particularly. Reggie was a disappointment to him. He wasn't a particularly attractive

little boy, too fat, bad at games and generally clumsy. Augustus tried not to show how he felt, he wasn't cruel, but children know. . . . I can remember Reggie standing in the garden of the house we had in Ealing, watching his father play with Louise. He was so different with her. I can remember Reggie standing there - *I* was weeding the rose-bed. After a bit he went indoors and up to his room. When I went after him, he'd locked the door. I used to think of that after Augustus had gone. That and the other things - all the things you remember afterwards. Once a marriage is over, I couldn't really believe it was over, though. We hadn't been altogether happy and that was partly my fault. I was quarrelsome. Miss Spit-and-Scratch, my mother used to call me. Once, after I was married, she said, "my girl, if you don't learn to guard your tongue you'll be sorry one day." But I enjoyed fighting with Augustus, he was so prim, such an old stodge. . . . I couldn't really believe he'd *gone*. I thought he'd walk in one day and it would be different, we'd both change. Of course, I gave that up, I'm not quite mad, but I couldn't - I couldn't quite shut the door. Even *that* must sound mad from an old woman after twenty-five years. But years go by faster than you think. You look in your mirror and you don't notice much difference, it's only other people who change. And they don't change if you don't see them. I'd always thought of her - and Augustus - as young. It was just a temporary infatuation between two young people. So when I saw her, it was a shock. I thought, why she's *old*. And *he's* old and *I'm* old. And suddenly it seemed terrible - all those wasted years of anger.'

'And love,' I said, with a sudden, suffocating feeling of pity.

She looked deeply embarrassed. 'Don't be sorry for me, Tom, that would be the last straw,' she said with strained

brightness and then, more naturally – more in the tone in which she had been speaking, ‘But of course I can’t divorce him now. It wouldn’t do anyone any good. I expect everyone where they live thinks they’re married. And it’s not as if they’d had children. I only thought of it because I wanted to make amends. That was childish.’

‘Human.’

‘All right. But it’s human, too, to hate the idea that some things are *done*’ She closed her eyes briefly as if to shut out some painful image. ‘Perhaps if I’d seen her, in the beginning, it might have made a difference. Though it shouldn’t have done. I should have had enough imagination.’

‘No one ever has about people they don’t know.’

‘Or about people they do know, either,’ she said. Her eyes sparked suddenly, with a return of her old fighting spirit. ‘*You’ve* never had any about poor Reggie, for example.’

‘Poor *Reggie*?’ Louise said, coming in with the tea tray. Her face was tear-stained and pale with the pity Julia would have shrunk from, had it been offered. Knowing this, even while she wept for her mother in the kitchen, had made Louise truculent. ‘How can you say poor *Reggie*? After the way he behaved to Jay?’

Julia drew in her breath. She held it for a moment, then expelled a deep, martyred sigh. ‘I’m not going to quarrel with you about *that*,’ she remarked mildly, adding, at once, ‘I only think that you might, just occasionally, allow your charity to begin at home.’

I I

THE coffee-bar was crowded with students. There was a smell of scalded milk and damp clothes. Through a hole someone had rubbed in the steam of the window you could see the snow falling lazily and insubstantially like torn up flakes of Kleenex. The girl at my table had pale cheeks and a pink nose and dry lips painted an unbecoming shade of brown; she wore a transparent nylon blouse that showed at least six shoulder straps and she was reading Bentham's *Economics*. Or pretending to read it; all the time I had been sitting there, she had not turned a page. There was an empty coffee-cup stained with the brown lipstick on the table in front of her and an open notebook with doodles in the margins; child-like houses, each with four windows and a door and a chimney-pot with squiggles of smoke rising from it. Every time the door of the bar opened, she looked up hopefully.

At the next table, like a deliberate demonstration of the unfairness of life, another girl was holding court. She wasn't beautiful - her skin was spotty - but she thought she was or the four young men who surrounded her had made her feel she was. At any rate, she glowed warmly with confident self-absorption, smiling inscrutably or gaily as the occasion demanded, fingering her hair, brightening her eyes with assumed interest in the young men's conversation when for the moment it turned away from her. One strand of hair hung, apparently carelessly, down the side of her marred young cheek. From time to time, my girl watched her with an expression of puzzled incomprehension. Once, she glanced into the peach-tinted mirror that covered one wall of the coffee-

bar and tugged furtively at a length of her own hair so that it fell loose, in imitation. The effect was clearly quite different; she blushed with ashamed disillusion before she turned back to Benham. But she was young, hope had not yet been deferred long enough to defeat her; the next time the door opened she looked up with bright, renewed eagerness and the beginnings of a smile that made her look almost pretty.

A young Indian, with fine features and a delicate air, came in. The girl's smile trembled slightly, then grew broad and artificial. The Indian nodded at her and she waved at him gaily. This was not the one she was waiting for, but he would do. He could protect her at least from the humiliation of sitting alone, unwanted. But the Indian only smiled in a polite and distant way and sat down on a high stool at the bar. The girl looked for a moment at his neat, well-dressed back before she bent over Benham, her cheeks, sagging in little pouches, crimson with her shame.

Up to now, watching her, I had not realized how long I had been waiting for Jay - I had reckoned to have to wait for him, after all. Now, looking at my watch, I saw he was over an hour late. Of course he might be busy but surely, in that case, he would have answered my letter and said so? I had given him time. . . . The cogs of self-doubt started turning. Why had I written to suggest this meeting anyway? His earlier letter, though perfectly dignified and friendly, had made it clear that he did not wish to see us at the moment. So why should I try to force myself on him? And what answer could he make, except silence? I looked at the girl. She was strapping her books together, a leaden look on her face. She had given up. She knew now that he wouldn't come. Her misery was like a statement of my own rejection.

Suddenly I wanted to leave at once. A stupid panic came

over me – a panic that I could trace right back. ‘Never push yourself in where you’re not wanted’, my mother used to say, a remarkably ungracious injunction based, not on tact, but on pride and on fear of rebuff that had nevertheless had its effect : I was terrified, now, that Jay would come late to his usual coffee-bar, thinking he had avoided me, and find me still sitting there.

I blundered into someone at the door.

‘Why, it is Mr Grant,’ Thomas Okapi said.

He was wearing a morning-suit with an enormous pink carnation in the button-hole. He was smoking a long cigar.

‘I have been officiating at a wedding,’ he explained. ‘I have been Best Man. I fear we were celebrating so cheerfully that I forgot the time.’

What time, I wondered? A look of fuddled puzzlement spread over his face as if he were wondering too. He breathed stalely into my face. ‘I was very sorry to hear, Mr Grant, that our mutual friend had left your premises. I must tell you that I have been working my fingers to the bone to find a new lodger for you, but I am afraid there has been some difficulty. Your office gave me the wrong telephone number.’

‘Yes, I heard. But I’m not –’

He wagged his great head at me solemnly, ash flying from his cigar. ‘I am deeply sorry if inconvenience has been caused. But now I have met you I can tell you that with luck I shall shortly be able to find you some pleasant person –’

‘I don’t want –’

‘Unfortunately I am not myself available or I am sure we would find great delight in each other’s company. But I am very nicely fixed. I have an extremely pleasant flat in a select district with an excellent prospect from the bedroom window.’

I said loudly, ‘I’m very glad, Mr Okapi. But I’m afraid

your efforts have been wasted. We don't want a lodger. Jay was a friend – a guest.'

'That is a great pity,' he said sternly. 'We are in great need of liberal-minded families in London. There are not enough to go round.'

What did he mean? Wild images chased through my mind an underground, cannibal society, starved of liberal flesh?

He said, 'All the same, it is fortunate we have met. I should have been here much earlier to bring you a message from our friend. He much regrets he cannot meet with you but he is indisposed.'

'What's wrong?'

He shrugged his vast shoulders. 'Some minor infection, nothing serious, I pray to God. You will doubtless discover the extent of his illness when you visit him.'

'I haven't got his address,' I said.

A

The street was long, a narrow brick canyon which could admit little light, even in summer. Here, on this grey London afternoon – the sky was dull pewter with snow – it seemed perceptibly darker than the day elsewhere. It was quiet, the only signs of life a small dog rootling among some refuse in the gutter, a rosy baby rocking in a pram. No shops, only a café exuding a rich smell of cooking oil and a seedy pub. The terraced houses were shabby but respectable, in the way my mother would have understood the word: the steps leading up to the front doors were swept, the windows clean.

Jay's house was half-way down the road, distinguished from its neighbours only by a window-box of dead geraniums. An iron door-knocker raised subterranean echoes. I waited. Through the frosted glass panels a head loomed, child-high.

But it wasn't a child. The opening door disclosed a face that was wrinkled and brown as an old russet apple. She was wearing a high-necked, black wool dress and high-heeled shoes on tiny, puffy feet. She said at once – presumably she was used to taking the initiative with strangers – 'Whom did you wish to see?' Her voice was surprisingly deep and she spoke precisely, like a foreigner.

'Mr Nbola. I'm a friend of his. I've just heard that he's ill.'

Her smile was kind. If you didn't look at the rest of her, she might have been any nice old woman, comfortable and good-hearted.

'He is a little better today.'

She opened the door wider and admitted me to a long, dark hall. Inside, as in any unheated London house in winter, it seemed colder than outside. The walls were covered with a thick, bubbly, chocolate-brown paper of a kind I had not seen since childhood.

'I'm Mrs Latour,' she said, and held out her hand. It was small and covered with dark liver spots – a hand not made for rings but she wore two enormous, theatrical rings in heavy gold settings. There was nothing else flamboyant about her. 'Are you from the university?' she asked. 'I am sure he will be glad to have a visitor.'

She began to climb the stairs. I followed her. Tiny though she was, her body had a stiff, orderly, corseted look. I remembered reading somewhere that midgets are perfectly formed – not dwarfs but like ordinary people seen through the wrong end of the telescope. I wondered if I looked to her like some grotesque enlargement of the normal.

She said, over her shoulder, 'A – have tried to look after him. But he says he is not hungry. He only wants to drink

tea. Luckily we are a very quiet house so he has been able to rest. On this floor there is only him and a Chinese gentleman who teaches at the London School of Oriental Studies. We prefer to have academic people because my husband has a heart condition and suffers if there is too much noise.'

We were on the second flight of stairs. I paused to look at a framed photograph of a tall circus clown and a tiny creature, a male midget, in absurdly baggy plus fours and a poacher's jacket.

'That is my husband, with Coco,' Mrs Latour said, from the landing.

I hurried up, ashamed of being caught prying, but she beamed at me pleasantly. 'We have performed with all the great clowns,' she said. 'That photograph was taken when we were with Bertiam Mills, at Olympia. Here is one of us both.'

I looked at the picture. I could think of nothing to say.

'You must have had a very interesting life,' I said foolishly.

'Indeed, yes. We were better known, of course, in France. Fantin and Latour. Our son is at the moment with the Grande Cirque. He has had very good notices.'

She spoke with tender pride like any mother of her son. Lifting her pudgy, ringed hand, she tapped on a door and said, 'Mr Nbola, you have a visitor.'

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Jay said, 'When I first arrived, I tell you, Tom, I did not know where I had landed up. I did not know where to *look*. If the Chinese gentleman had not come in behind me I think I would have fled. But I am glad now. Mrs Latour and her husband are very nice. Very kind.'

The room was narrow and high, carved out of a larger room; the plaster swag of the Victorian ceiling was cut off abruptly at the partition wall. It was clean, barely furnished and very cold. We huddled over the gas fire that roared as importantly as a miniature furnace but gave off little heat. It was the pressure, Jay explained. At night, when the other fires in the house were in use, the jets were barely alight.

'I go to bed then,' he said, and grinned.

His face shocked me. He was so much thinner. When he smiled, his lips stretched over his teeth. His eyes seemed to have sunk into the hollows of his skull.

I said he should have asked for an additional fire. He shook his head. 'I don't like to bother Mrs Latour. Besides, we pay extra for heating. In bed with a hot water bottle is cheaper.' He looked anxious. 'Are you cold, Tom? I am very, very sorry. If only you had let me know you were coming.' His gaze flickered away from mine. 'I have nothing to offer you. Except wait a minute.'

He bent down to a cupboard at the side of the fire. It contained his food store: margarine, tea, a few tins and a half-finished bottle of milk. 'Here,' he said triumphantly, holding up a miniature bottle of whisky with a loop of pink ribbon at the neck. 'Thomas brought me this the other day. He could not stop. Thomas is always very busy and I do not like to drink alone. You don't mind drinking out of a cup.'

'No.' I watched him fiddling with the gold foil on the bottle. 'Thomas wasn't very anxious to give me your address.'

He gave me a quick look. 'Oh. Thomas is a man who likes to make mysteries. It makes him feel big.'

'You hadn't asked him not to tell me?'

'Why should I do that?' he asked with transparently

assumed astonishment – he was a frightfully bad liar – ‘It is as I said. Thomas is like a woman. He enjoys inventing secrets.’ He looked at me to see if I had believed this and went on, ‘And he was probably being difficult because you are English. He dislikes Englishmen. He has a great fat chip on his shoulder. The other day he was invited to lunch at Chatham House and he was made to eat sandwiches, standing up. He was *extremely* angry. He said he would not have been treated so casually if he had been a white man.’

‘That’s nonsense. Most meetings of that kind are buffet affairs.’

I laughed, not at poor Thomas, but because Jay was so obviously trying to divert my attention.

He said seriously, ‘Of course you’re right, Tom. And even if you were not, Thomas is a fool to get angry. It is a waste of energy. There is no real battle in England on this matter of colour. Only pinpricks.’ He waved his hand contemptuously. ‘Skirmishes on the frontier.’

I wondered if he really believed this. ‘Less of the iceberg shows above the surface, perhaps,’ I said.

He shrugged his shoulders. He did not want to discuss this. He poured out the whisky and handed me a white china cup with a flourish. ‘It is very good whisky,’ he said. ‘It will help to keep out the cold.’

Drinking reduced the discomfort between us, though things were far from right. I decided to ignore the clear fact that he had not wanted to see me – when I first entered the room he had looked at me with simple dismay – and asked about his illness. He did not want to discuss this either. He had seen a doctor, Mrs Latour had insisted. It was bronchitis. It was not serious. He was feeling much better. The implication behind his short answers was that his health was no concern of

mine. He was behaving rather like a son bored by a fussy parent, letting his gaze wander round the walls of his room with an affected lack of interest.

He seized on a more impersonal topic. Mrs Latour had been very kind. She and her husband were both very nice, everyone who lived in the house appreciated how nice they were and did what they could to help them, carrying coals, and so on. Though they had had special bathroom and kitchen equipment installed, the domestic boiler in the basement was far too large for them to manage. They had been thinking about converting to oil but it was unlikely they would do this now. Their son was coming from France next month on his way to America and had written to say he wanted to take his parents with him. If they decided to go, they would almost certainly sell the house. It would give them a little capital - they had no source of income other than from their lodgers - and that would be all they would need. They had a daughter in California and their son was doing well in his profession.

Jay spoke about them in a flat, serious way as if determined to prove to me - and to himself - that they were perfectly ordinary people.

I tried to exorcise the ghost of a giggle. 'It won't be so easy to sell the house if everything is low down.'

Jay laughed outright. Then he turned his laugh into a cough and looked uncomfortable.

He said, 'If they do go, it will be sad for all of us here. It will not be easy to find such agreeable lodgings again.'

'You could come back to us.'

He shook his head, unsmiling.

'I wish you would, anyway. It's just such a dreary, idiotic nonsense. I feel terrible about it.'

He said slowly, 'There is no need. You need not feel *at all* responsible for me, Tom.'

'I don't. It's not that.' I hesitated, because it *was* that, in part. I said, 'We've been very dull since you left. I've missed you. Louise too. We've both missed you.'

'How is Louise?'

'All right. She's had a cold. She'd be very happy if you'd come back. Really Jay. . . '

He laughed as if he did not quite believe this but as if it gave him pleasure all the same. Then he stood up, looked at the cheap alarm clock on the mantelpiece and said, 'It is too early to go to a pub. But there is quite a pleasant café on the corner. If you like, we could go there and have tea.'

'Should you go out.'

'I think a short walk would strengthen me. Besides, I am hungry – I must be getting better. The café is not a very grand place but the food is quite good and the conditions are hygienic. I would be pleased if you would be my guest there.'

v

The café was empty. The owner, a tall, shambling man like a tired old bear, set two plates of sizzling steak and chips in front of us, nodded gloomily to Jay and shuffled back behind the counter where he sat, limply folded over on a high stool and staring at the black, bare window. He looked as if he had been born depressed, lived depressed, and would never be anything else to the day he was lowered into his grave and earth shovelled on top of him.

He looked as if he lacked the energy to boil an egg, but the steak was good, red in the middle and charred on the outside. I enjoyed it, though I was not in the least hungry and

had only chosen the steak, the most expensive dish on the menu, to please Jay. It did please him. The ritual of being a host ('Is it done as you like it, Tom? If not we can send it back at once') invigorated him and smoothed out his earlier prickliness. He set out to be amusing and to charm me, rather as a young man might set out to charm his father, once he had successfully asserted his independence. The balance of our relationship had shifted and if this saddened me a little - who doesn't, after all, prefer to be the giver? - I told myself that it was a change for the better

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By the time we left, the pub was open and we went in for a beer. The pub, like the café, was clean and 'respectable'. It glittered with brass. On the counter were various devices for coaxing money out of the reluctantly charitable: there was a plastic dog that shot pennies off its nose into a red and yellow kennel, a lighthouse of coppers for spastics and a rather sadly unimaginative Christmas stocking for the blind. A piano in one corner promised an increase in jollity later in the evening; for the moment a murmuring gloom prevailed. Two Jamaicans in denims were playing darts; by the fire a pair of old ladies scorched their knees and silently contemplated their glasses of gin and orange.

We talked in undertones, as if in church.

'It is a very good pub, very friendly,' Jay said. He looked at me anxiously. 'It is very quiet now, but it is early. Later on it will be more amusing. Before I was ill I came in here one evening and some Welshmen taught me to sing their national anthem in Welsh.'

'That can't have been easy. It's a difficult language.'

'Yes.' Jay looked reflective. 'At least they *said* it was their

national anthem. But from the laughter which resulted I think it may not have been.'

He looked pleased when I laughed and then lifted his glass to a newcomer, a thickly set, powerful-looking man who had just come in with a girl. He acknowledged Jay with a grin and a surreptitious jerk of his head towards his companion. They went to sit at the bar.

'A friend of mine,' Jay said proudly. 'Mr Jones. Mr Edward Jones who is working on an important building site. He is one of the Welsh gentlemen I told you about. He has three children, one a boy the same age as Philip.' He looked at Jones's girl who had blonde hair back-combed into an enormous beehive and who wore stiletto heels, jeans and a tight sweater. 'I do not think that can be Miss Jones,' he murmured gently.

'Hardly.'

'Perhaps there will be an opportunity to introduce you later. He is a nice man, though not educated. We had an excellent evening together.' He chuckled. 'He has an immense capacity for beer.'

Absurdly, I felt slightly piqued. I had not meant to tell Jay about the possibility of the African job until it was settled. That I changed my mind now was partly of course because I couldn't bear *not* to tell him, but I had, also, an infantile desire to impress myself on him as a friend of more standing than a builder's labourer. Kunz had told me, when we lunched, that I could take it as almost quite definite that the scheme would be accepted, and that I would be offered the job. In fact, if I would attend a sort of preliminary Board composed of himself and two other men who would be concerned in my appointment, the whole thing might be satisfactorily arranged before he went back to Geneva.

'So I should have a clearer idea tomorrow. Though of course it may still fall through. . . .'

Jay's delight was whole-hearted. 'It will be a magnificent experience for you, Tom,' he said solemnly. 'An experience you will remember all your life. How does Louise take to it?'

'She's excited. She's bought a book on Swahili.'

'We must have another beer to celebrate,' he cried, and swept up our glasses.

By the time we got to our fourth pint, the pub had filled up and was growing noticeably noisier. Certainly, the hush that fell when Mrs Latour came in, was uncomfortably noticeable. She made her way to the bar, diminutive and erect in a black coat and a round felt hat of the kind schoolgirls wear and asked for a bottle of Tolly and a packet of cigarettes. She had to stand on tiptoe to peep over the counter. After that first, brief silence, talk was resumed again. No one – apart from the odd, covert glance – looked at her except Jay who watched her with a peculiar, intense stare. When she tucked the beer bottle into her basket and smiled, timidly, it seemed, in our direction, he gave a deep, shuddering sigh before he sprang to his feet and went to open the door for her. There was something more than mere politeness in his gesture; it was performed with a kind of belligerent flourish that attracted attention. When he called after her, 'Good night, Mrs Latour', the hush fell again and several people turned to stare at him. He walked back to me and said in a loud voice, as if to cover up some embarrassment he felt, 'What about another beer?'

'I won't, if you don't mind. I ought to get back. Let me get you one.'

'No, thank you, Tom. I think I should go home too.' His gaiety had left him and he looked tired and listless.

I took our glasses to the bar. Mr Edward Jones grinned at me as I edged my way in. He had a broad, good-natured but stupid face the colour of mulled claret and very light blue eyes threaded with veins. 'D'you see what came in then?' he asked in a friendly, confidential voice. His girl gave a thin shriek and he winked at me and tweaked her nipple. 'Give me the nigs any time,' he said. 'At least they're human.'

I grinned back, reluctantly, and I with a miserable sense of kinship.

*

One of the boys at my school had had a deformed sister, a neckless child whose head, it was said, rose directly out of her shoulders. The boy, Alfred Budge, lived in my town, this was generally considered a piece of luck on my part. 'Have you seen Budge's sister?' I was often asked enviously. For a long time I was able to say, truthfully, that I had not. Though I had often glimpsed Budge on Saturday mornings wheeling an ominously loaded pushchair down the main street, I had always managed to avoid coming face to face with him, pointedly looking the other way or fleeing in panic into the nearest shop. But one morning I was too late; he saw me and called out. I was forced to cross the road and stand by the pushchair while he asked about some homework we had been set that week-end. I tried not to look down at the child – partly from squeamish fear and partly out of courtesy to Budge – but she put out her hand and tugged at my jacket. I was terrified sick; it took all my control not to jerk back and slap her hand away. 'Say Hallo, Shirley,' Budge said calmly – he was a remarkably brave boy and a good one – and I looked at her. She was more horrible than I had imagined; like a tadpole, with a great head and shrunken

limbs mercifully encased in a blanket. The worst thing about her – oh, quite the worst thing – were her eyes which were blue and clear and normal as any child's. I don't remember what I said to her. I gave her a sweet, I think, and prompted by Budge she thanked me, but I remember clearly – I can remember it now – that I hated her. And Budge too. I couldn't forget her eyes. . . .

I revenged myself on him the next week when I gave a select group in the lavatories an account of our meeting, adding a few picturesque details for good measure. One boy, who was something of a natural cartoonist, drew a picture on the wall; I added a caption underneath.

x

The café where we had eaten was opposite the pub; it jutted out onto the pavement and on the invariably blank wall at the side, in the light of the street lamp, someone had chalked the words *Keep Brixton* . . . Though the following word was blocked by two boys who were standing on the pavement with their backs to us, it didn't need much imagination to guess the rest of this hospitable message. I glanced shamefacedly at Jay as we crossed the road.

But I was wrong. Or wrong *now*, anyway. The boys had been making an alteration. As we drew level with them they turned, uncertainly, and we could see what they had been up to.

Keep Brixton Full Size.

Jay stood stock-still. His head was sunk between his shoulders, his profile without expression. He said, to the bigger boy. 'Did you do this?' His tone was one of mild surprise.

The child, who held a lump of chalk in his hand, stared at

him dumbly. The other one giggled shrilly and hopped sideways. The older boy – he was about twelve – ducked his head to run but Jay shot out an arm.

‘Dirty little pig,’ he said slowly. ‘Dirty little white pig.’

He got the boy by the shoulders and shook him, half lifting him off the ground. Then, suddenly, he began to shout in Swahili. His white teeth gleamed in his dark face, he showed the whites of his eyes like a horse. The boy hung from his hands, limp as a puppet. His terrified eyes were fixed on Jay’s terrifying face. The other child danced up and down in the gutter, shouting in a high, thin voice.

‘For God’s sake, Jay,’ I said. I caught at his arm. He glanced at me briefly before he flung the boy away from him.

He landed on all fours on the pavement. He was whimpering and his nose had begun to bleed. The smaller boy helped him up and squeaked, ‘He’s all over blood. You didn’t ought——’ He faced up to us defiantly. He was about four foot ten, and plucky. ‘It was only a *joke*,’ he said.

I looked at Jay. ‘A pretty rotten sort of joke,’ I said. Then, shamefully forcing anger, ‘Get along with you, or I’ll tan your backsides.’

They ran off, the bigger boy limping and snivelling. Safely out of reach, they turned. The young one shouted, ‘Black bugger.’

Jay was shivering. I said, ‘You’d better get home. This won’t do you any good.’

‘I’m all right.’ He tugged a handkerchief out of his pocket. ‘We’d better clean up this filth.’

The brick was rough and scraped the skin from our fingertips. Jay went at it like a lunatic.

I said, ‘That’ll do. No one can read it now.’

'Do you think she saw it?' He was breathing hard. I could smell his sweat. 'God damn them,' he said quietly. 'God damn them. The lousy little bastards.'

I had never heard him swear before. I said miserably, 'They're only kids. It's understandable.'

'Understandable?' he said, in pure astonishment.

'Well. Oh - I know it's cruel - contemptible - but innocent enough, in a sense. Innocent of malice, anyway. I mean it's natural, an *animal* kind of hostility. To them she must seem - oh, even to *me*——' I stopped, ashamed.

'But she's human, Tom,' he said, perturbed. 'Not so different. You should' his voice shook - 'you should look at her *eyes*.'

His own eyes filled with tears. He blew his nose, trumpeting into his chalky handkerchief. Then he said, more calmly, 'I'm afraid it has made an inharmonious end to your visit. Next time I shall hope to entertain you better.'

'You must come and see us. We must fix a time.'

He said evasively, 'I'll give you a tinkle,' I wondered where he had picked up that awful phrase - and held out his hand which felt limp and cold. 'I'm sorry, Tom, if you think I behaved badly.'

'I don't think that.'

'I shouldn't have shaken the boy. It will have solved nothing,' He paused. 'But you don't really think that what he did was excusable, Tom?'

'No,' I said. I felt that I had been forced to re-visit and live through a shame I thought I had long ago forgotten - at least in terms of full recognition and experiencing. Perhaps it was salutary. It left me numb and self-despising.

'No, I don't think that,' I said.

LATER that evening, the telephone rang. Louise answered it. She put her head round the drawing-room door and hissed dramatically, 'Do you know who this is? Reggie. My God - what cheek!'

'What does he want?'

'Apparently his Lordship is in London. And he can't get into an hotel.' She paused. Her face was red. 'He wants us to put him up!'

'What have you said?'

'That I'd ask you.'

'Then you'd better say yes.'

She stared incredulously. 'Don't you *remember* how he behaved last time he was here?'

'Yes. But if he can't get into an hotel. . . .'

It seemed she was indignant enough for both of us. I was able to take a broad, calm view. What right had I to despise Reggie? If he was prejudiced against blacks and Jews, I was prejudiced against midgets - and fat men. Prejudice was feeling, not intellectual conviction, and no one could help having feelings: all anyone could do was to control the expression of them. In this case, I could make a start by being hospitable to *this* fat man. I listened to Louise, talking crisply into the telephone, and enjoyed a confused sense of virtue.

She came back into the room and sat down, making it clear by her silence and her averted gaze that I had disappointed her. But she couldn't keep it up. Finally, she said, 'I suppose we could hardly refuse. But - my God!' Her cheeks puffed

out explosively. 'If you'd been him, could you have rung up like this? Goodness, his hide must be thick as a pig's.'

'Perhaps it's a kind of apology,' I said, charitably not reminding her of her usual argument that Reggie was so sensitive.

'Nonsense. He's never apologized to anyone in his life!'

I let her rant on, knowing full well that once Reggie arrived, she would be perfectly sisterly and welcoming. The truth was that she was instinctively frightened of Reggie. She might rage against him to her mother and to me, but when he was actually present, she choked up in the face of his stronger personality. She had never, to my knowledge, directly quarrelled with him; if they did disagree, she took refuge behind a display of timid femininity while she made absurd statements so wide of the mark that he could not possibly take them seriously. On those occasions she had reminded me of a squirrel chattering angrily from the high safety of a tree. She provoked, from Reggie, just that amused, benevolent response.

But this time, it seemed, her anger went deeper than usual. When Reggie arrived she was curt with him, stumping off to bed within the next half-hour. Reggie was taken aback, I think, though he had clearly been very doubtful of his welcome and had brought a bottle of Courvoisier with him as a peace offering. The nervous haste with which he produced this, holding it out like a magic charm almost as soon as he got inside the door, and a certain tortured humility about his whole behaviour – he insisted on asking my advice, though he must have known it was utterly useless, about certain transactions he was in the process of making on the Stock Exchange – made me warm towards him.

As a result, we sat up later than I had intended and drank more of his brandy than I really wanted to, while we dis-

cussed the Stock Exchange, the weather, the Government and Reggie's chief financial worry at the moment which was that he was beginning to make a profit out of his farm. He blamed this misfortune on the fact that Shirley had insisted on installing a broiler house for the production of cheap chickens, but it was clear to me that the real fault lay elsewhere, in his own, inescapable efficiency.

Reggie, I thought, could turn a lost cause into a profitable venture, perhaps because it was not in him to admit the possibility of loss.

Later that evening, after a lot of brandy, I had a moment of fuzzy-edged clarity in which it suddenly seemed that idealism was redundant: the best form of Government for a sad, starving world might be by benevolent despots, archetypal Reggies.

Tempered, possibly, by assassination.

*

When I woke the next morning, Reggie had already breakfasted and gone. I had a throbbing head and a sticky tongue. It wasn't the brandy entirely. My sinuses were stuffed to congestion with the beginnings of a snorting cold. Though my head was leaden the rest of my body seemed weightless. I floated into the bathroom, gargled, and looked for the aspirin.

After breakfast, I felt fractionally more human. My appointment with Kunz and his chums was for eleven-thirty. With luck, black coffee and more aspirin I would be able to face them though, as always, at this fragile moment life produced its minor frustrations: my good suit needed cleaning and there was egg on my best tie.

'But you've plenty of others,' Louise said.

In the jaded mood I was in, this remark seemed to point

to the complete failure of our marriage, as far as mutual understanding and comfort in adversity was concerned. In a bleak, mourning silence, I went to the bathroom and tried to sponge my tie.

The telephone rang. Louise answered it. I heard her talking, though not what she said and then, with a sinking heart, the ominous *clunk* as she put the receiver down on the table.

She entered the bathroom with a stricken face.

'Tom, it's Jay. Not on the telephone. I mean - he's in prison.' And then, in exactly the same distracted tone, 'You're making it much worse.'

'What?'

'Your tie. It'll leave a much worse mark if you do that.'

'Couldn't you have said so before?' I asked coldly, and fled into the bedroom.

*

Thomas's voice was lugubrious. He regretted disturbing me, regretted it more than he could say, but my immediate aid was necessary. He had called on our mutual friend at an early hour to make inquiries after his health, to discover that Jay had been arrested late last night and would be appearing at the police court this morning. He had left a message asking that I be informed but unfortunately no one had my telephone number. He himself had only managed to get it after a long conversation with Directory inquiries.

'What happened?' I asked. I felt nothing, except a strong desire to murder Thomas.

Thomas was legalistically cautious. He had found no reliable informant, no actual witness. Only a Mr Chan who lived in the same house. He had been aroused by the noise and had a brief word with Jay before he was carried off by

the police. Jay told him that a Mr Edward Jones had called at a late hour. Jay had opened the door to him because everyone else was in bed and Mr Jones had remonstrated with him about an incident earlier in the evening when, he said, Jay had viciously attacked his young son. Jay had denied this and said. . . .

‘I know what happened. I was there,’ I said impatiently. ‘Go on.’

‘Regrettably, the altercation became violent,’ Thomas said juicily. ‘After a short interval a number of neighbours were disturbed by the loud noise. Apparently Mr Jones was full of liquor and not to be restrained. Eventually some law-abiding person called the police who came immediately and bore them both off to gaol.’ His voice throbbed with emotion. ‘I fear deeply for my friend,’ he said. ‘I am certain, in the recesses of my own heart, of his innocence and good character, but will anyone believe a black man?’ Mr Grant, what will become of him?’

‘Nothing much, I daresay. Did he do any damage to Mr Jones?’

‘Mr Chan said that when he arrived on the scene, Jay was leaping upon Mr Jones’s stomach. Three men were attempting to restrain him. Jay said he was angered because Mr Jones had drawn a knife on him.’

‘Charming. But if Jones had a knife——’

‘He will deny it,’ Thomas said with conviction. ‘And he was complaining to the police officer that Jay had assaulted his son. It is well known that the English though scrupulous in many ways are prejudiced against foreigners. If Mr Jones’s accusation is believed, it is possible that the case might not be dealt with summarily. Jay might be sent for trial. Since he is African, he might not even be released on bail. . . .’

'Which police court?' I asked, resigned.

'Brixton. Mr Grant, we will be most deeply indebted. . . .'

'I'll see you there,' I said, and put the receiver down.

I turned to Louise. 'Darling, get the car out, will you? While I find a decent tie.'

Her hand flew to her mouth. Above it, her eyes were tragic.

'It's got a flat tyre. And the spare's no good. The garage said they'd be round this morning.'

'For God's sake, why didn't you tell me last night?'

'You didn't ask - besides, I thought you'd be cross,' she said miserably.

Rage swelled up inside me like an inflating balloon. 'Am I an ogre?' I shouted in a fine temper, snatching my brief-case, the clean tie she held out to me - one I particularly disliked, as it turned out - and ignoring, as I swept out of the house, her pale, upturned face.

*

The policeman at the door of the court was young and pink-faced. He looked as if he should be wearing white flannels and bowling a graceful slow over on some sunlit, idyllic sports day. He gave me his respectful attention, inclining one ear towards me with a stately affectation of being an elderly man, rather deaf. He was polite. No, there would be no objection to my giving evidence of character nor to my giving other evidence, if relevant. He would speak to the officer-in-charge. As long as I did not mind waiting. They always took the drunks first, then the remands. I could sit here on the bench until my name was called. Or I could go into the court if I liked, as long as I came out before the case in which I was a witness came up. 'Though there's

nothing much this morning, I'm afraid,' he said. 'Nothing *sensational*, if you see what I mean, sir?'

He spoke regretfully, like the manager of a suburban theatre envious of a successful West End run.

I sat on the bench, provided by what I now saw as a thoughtful theatrical management, and looked at the wall clock. It was ten. If Jay's case hadn't come up by ten-thirty, I would have to ring Kunz and say I was delayed. I blew my nose and the sound echoed back from the tiled walls watery and hollow : it was like blowing one's nose in the corridors of a public bath.

There were other people waiting. A trap-faced woman with her son : a loutish boy with black-rimmed nails who jerked his shoulders angrily whenever his mother looked at him. Sitting next to them, a small, mousey housewife with a pursed-up, worried face and a drooping, grizzled moustache who clutched her shopping basket and muttered over and over again like the rabbit in *Alice* : *I don't know why, I don't know why really I don't, I don't know why*. . . . Her eyes were fixed straight ahead in a bleak, watery stare. No one took any notice of her obsessional chant except a middle-aged man in a bowler hat sitting on the bench opposite her and reading – or affecting to read – the *Daily Telegraph*.

He folded it with a rustle and a sigh; his eyes lighted disapprovingly on the muttering woman before roving very slowly round the whole room. I think, if they had not met mine, he would have peered quickly beneath the benches. He raised his eyebrow at me and twisted his mouth into what was intended to be a rueful smile. It said, clearly as words : *what company, we of the middle classes are forced to keep!* Then he averted his gaze modestly and stared at the tiled wall behind my head. His hands, which were narrow and

rather delicate, pleated the *Daily Telegraph* into a concertina frill.

At twenty past ten, the mousey woman was called into court. She came out ten minutes later, looking startled and pink round the nose, but no longer muttering.

I followed her into the street. The telephone box on the corner was empty. I entered it, set down my brief-case, searched among my loose change for some pennies and then paused, the lifted receiver in my hand.

I hadn't got Kunz's number.

Nor could I remember the name of the hotel where I was due to meet him.

I think I must have stood motionless for several minutes, mindless as a basilisk in the desert; frozen, not by what I had forgotten, not even by the fact of forgetting, but because I had been swept back into an old nightmare.

Once I had forgotten – or thought I had forgotten – my mother's birthday. On the way to school it had suddenly come to me that perhaps this was The Day – looked forward to, saved up for – but the memory both of the actual date of her anniversary and of *this* day, mysteriously eluded me. I was sitting in the bus. One moment that was all it was; me, sitting in the bus, staring out guiltily at the flat, Kentish fields and trying to remember. The next, I had a sudden, terrifying image of myself, alone in the empty landscape of my mind, a landscape seen shockingly clearly. It was a desolate country full of vast, frozen shapes, mountains and hills that rolled hopelessly on – I knew it – for ever and ever. Nothing stirred, there was no sound. It was a terrible place of loss and solitude and I was lost and alone there.

It was a country I revisited. Once when I was ill, once during an examination, and several times for no reason that

I can now discover. When I thought about it – I could not think at all when I was *there* – I called it the Moon Country.

I returned from it – on that bus, and now in the telephone box in Brixton – feeling tired and limp. My legs were spongy, my head ached. I felt both ashamed and relieved. Stupid, also: it was ridiculous that a lapse of memory should drive me into this kind of fugue. I didn't live in the Moon Country any more than I lived in the Land of the King's Cows. There was no real terror, no real sense of personal desolation and perhaps no abiding joy either, once childhood had passed. The world I inhabited now was a place where a lost telephone number, a forgotten birthday, were simply tedious irritations, nothing more. One might feel one had lost, in some deep sense, oneself, but the moment you felt it, it was gone, had become only words, an affectation. On a rising tide of rational assessment I realized that I probably had a temperature and that I could at least remember where I had left Kunz's letter, making the appointment and giving his address. It was on the small table beside the bed.

Reprieved, I used my pennies to telephone Louise and listened to the bell ringing and ringing in the empty house. She would be out shopping. I put back the receiver and closed my eyes tightly as if I could squeeze the name of the hotel out of my defaulting memory.

It was a trick that sometimes worked. It didn't now. The failure produced in me a numbed exasperation and a diffuse sense of guilt; because of Kunz, because I had left home in a bad temper that morning, because, staying too long in the telephone box I might have missed my call.

As I went up the steps to the court, the middle-aged man in the bowler hat passed me, clutching his brief-case and his *Daily Telegraph*. Jerkily striding, like a man in a cartoon,

he marched off down the street. Looking after him, I collided with a stout lady in the entrance. I apologized and she smiled; she was the kind of old lady I liked, over sixty and plumply cheerful about it with a nice, well-seasoned face. She nodded towards the vanishing bowler and said, 'You wouldn't think it to look at him, would you? Forty quid fine.'

'What for?'

'Stealing sock suspenders. Two dozen pairs. He said he couldn't think what came over him.'

'Perhaps he couldn't.'

'They all say that. Oh, you get all sorts in here. I often drop in when I'm out doing my bit of shopping. Nice and warm and takes the weight off your feet. Gives you a bit of interest, too.' She smiled at me again. Assuming, perhaps out of delicacy, that my purpose was the same as hers, she said, 'You'll find Court One's the best, dear.'

*

I was called at ten past eleven. I took the oath, reading from the card the pleasantly smiling policeman held out to me, and looked at the magistrate who smiled too. He was a round, little man with a face like a good apple. Gold-rimmed pince-nez perched on his short, stubby nose. He said, in a soft, precise voice, 'It is extremely good of you to come here, Mr Grant. What would you like to tell us?'

I had never been in a police court before and this gentle courtesy was not what I had expected. I don't know what I had expected, now I come to think of it, but certainly not this curiously hospitable atmosphere.

Reassured, I glanced at Jay for the first time and immediately doubt swept over me.

He looked so – absolutely villainous. He was sitting beside

Edward Jones in a sort of rabbit-hutch enclosure opposite the magistrate's raised desk. His head was sunk slightly forward. One eye was completely closed, the lid swollen, purplish and veined with red. The lapel of his jacket had been ripped almost quite away. Jones's appearance was tidier as his head, or at least the side I could see, was enclosed in a bandage. But they looked I thought with distant despair – distant, because my cold seemed to have cocooned my mind in a fuzz of cotton wool – a pretty pair of thugs.

The magistrate prompted me gently. 'Mr Grant, I understand you know Mr Nbola and, though you were not a witness to the disturbance, you were present at an incident earlier in the evening.'

'Yes, sir.' My voice was hoarse and almost inaudible. He leaned forward, cupping his hand behind his ear and nodding thoughtfully from time to time. He asked me two questions.

'What did you say was written on the wall?'

I was sure he had heard me the first time but I told him again. He turned down the corners of his mouth and sat silent for a moment before he glanced at the plain-clothes policeman beside him and repeated the phrase with the sarcastic relish of a schoolmaster playing to the gallery. I suppose he couldn't resist it but as soon as he had spoken he frowned as if castigating himself for this lapse of taste and fixed his eye coldly on a young policeman who had tittered by the door.

He asked me quickly, 'You're sure Nbola did not hurt the boy?'

'Yes. He shook him, but not hard. He frightened him, that's all. I . . .'

I was gathering momentum. Now I had seen what Jay looked like, I estimated his predicament as more serious than I had imagined before and was prepared to make a long

speech in my faint, almost vanishing voice, about the length of time I had known him, his achievements, his character and so forth.

But the magistrate had heard all he wanted.

'Thank you so *much*, Mr Grant,' he said with his charming, old-fashioned politeness and I was dismissed as authoritatively as if he had bellowed like a regimental sergeant-major.

I left the box and sat down on the public benches by the side of a very old man who appeared to be fast asleep: from time to time a short, barking snore shook him awake. He looked round with surprise, blinked, and sank into sleep again.

The magistrate picked up what looked like a small penknife from his desk and fiddled with it ineffectively. He said, to the plain-clothes policeman, 'This doesn't look very dangerous to me.'

The policeman smiled deferentially. 'If you'll just press that button – shall I show you, sir?'

'No, let me do it,' the magistrate said with a faint snappishness. He fiddled with the thing again; when the flick knife shot out it made him jump, then he smiled beatifically, like a boy, and nodded.

He looked at the prisoners, who stood up. He said, 'Jones, since your son may well have given you a somewhat misleading account of Nbola's behaviour towards him, I am prepared to believe you may have been under some provocation. But as you have appeared in this court before. . . .'

He glanced inquiringly at the clerk who said, 'Five times, sir. Drunk and disorderly, drunk, drunk and disorderly. . . .'

The magistrate waved his hand.

'You see, I cannot be lenient.' He spoke amiably, rather as

if he and Jones were discussing the mild misdemeanours of some common friend. 'You will pay a fine of five pounds for drunkenness, fifteen pounds for a breach of the peace and twenty pounds for being in possession of an offensive weapon. I should also warn you that if you persist in drinking to excess you may one day injure someone seriously and find yourself in prison.'

'Time to pay, sir,' Jones said laconically, though his big hands were clasped tightly on the rail in front of him and his heavy shoulders looked strong and tensed as a bull's.

'Three months. Nbola, you will pay a fine of two pounds into the court immediately and I shall hope not to see you here again. You have told me Mr Jones is a friend of yours. I would suggest that you should be more careful about the company you keep in future and try to curb your chivalrous impulses. At least the physical expression of them. Do you understand me?'

'Yes, sir. Thank you, sir,' Jay said in a husky voice. He did not move until the policeman touched him on the arm.

*

Before I could leave, the court rose. I stood, while the magistrate gathered his papers and looked with frustration and misery at the clock. It was just after twelve. I had realized, while the magistrate was passing sentence, that although I couldn't remember the name of Kunz's hotel, I knew where it was – a turning off Piccadilly somewhere. In a taxi I would almost certainly be able to find it. *If* I could get a taxi, *if* the traffic wasn't too bad. Even then I should be over an hour late. . . .

The first person I saw as I left the court was Thomas. He hurried towards me, hands outstretched.

'I'm glad you managed to get here,' I said in a thoroughly surly tone.

He beamed. 'I have broken my neck to be on time. I was standing inside the door while you gave your evidence. You did well, Mr Grant. Each sentence succinct and to the point. I could hardly have done better myself.'

'Thank you,' I said. It was impossible to hold out against that monumentally well-meaning smile.

'Although the outcome should really have been in no doubt, I confess I was worried. You and I, Mr Grant, know our friend to be a fine young man, fit to mix with the greatest in the land. But I had not thought the magistrate would be so discerning. *He* is a fine man, a man I would be proud to shake by the hand.'

The recipient of this honour appeared in the foyer, looking small and roundly mummified in a long overcoat and a striped knitted scarf that enveloped his face beneath his black Homburg hat. As I hurried to Jay who had just emerged from another door, I saw Thomas rumble down on him, like a tank.

Jay didn't speak. He touched my hand briefly and looked at me with distressed, moist eyes. I asked him if he had the money for the fine. He nodded, he looked ill and cold. He had his raincoat over his arm; I hustled him into it and explained that I was in a hurry. I had an appointment – I hadn't the heart to tell him I was late for it – and would need a taxi. Unless he was anxious to go with Thomas, I would drop him off at his house on the way.

We went towards the main door. Thomas and the magistrate were already there, the little man backing away with a furious, trapped look on his face which had become so red that it looked raw. Thomas's voice echoed back dankly from the tiled walls.

‘. . . a magnificent example of British Justice, sir. I am proud – yes, proud to have been present to observe it. I and my friends here cannot thank you enough. I only wish there was something I personally could do to show appreciation.’

He drew his hand out of his pocket. Stiff with horror, I wondered if he was going to offer him money. Surely even Thomas was aware that in England this was not normal practice? Apparently the magistrate had the same thought. His eyes flashed such blistering anger that I was surprised Thomas did not recoil, as from a blinding light.

But he only offered his hand. ‘I wish to shake hands with you, sir,’ he said.

The magistrate’s face twitched. He looked at Thomas and for an appalling moment betrayed his helpless, physical aversion. It was something I had heard people talk of but never actually seen before. Then he put out his hand and touched Thomas’s, as if it were a toad.

Thomas said, ‘I will detain you no longer, sir,’ and bowed from the waist with a stiff, heavy dignity and I silently applauded: *he* was the victor in this encounter. Then, of course, he spoiled it. He added, ‘I had feared – I can admit it now – that colour prejudice, even in England, might possibly obstruct the course of justice.’

The little man was quivering. He said with controlled, icy wrath, ‘In England, sir, decent people do not allow their prejudices to interfere with their behaviour.’

And walked out, bantam-rock erect, diminished in one sense and not in another, which is usually the case with most people, most of the time.

Thomas turned to me. ‘I have my car, Mr Grant. I would be overjoyed to offer you a lift to your place of work.’

Thomas had a singular talent. He appeared, in the weeks he had been in England, to have mastered the map of London. Once we had dropped Jay who lived only a few streets away from the court and I had impressed on him the need for haste he drove like a cab driver. Like a fictional cab driver, that is, and one who was slightly mad. We must have switched directions twenty times in the first ten minutes, surging down narrow back streets, in and out of neglected squares, scattering dogs, children; once we turned in to what seemed a garage workshop and emerged the other side, in a main street. His technical skill was enormous and yet he treated the car, it seemed to me, not like a machine but like an *animal*: as he backed out of one side road that was blocked by an unloaded lorry, you could almost feel the car's haunches quiver as it gathered itself for the next leap forward.

It was a small car, and several years old. The springs had complained when he got into the driving seat. He was cramped there, thick and solid and lumpy, like a powerful piece of modern sculpture. His face streamed with sweat like runnels of water down the side of a mountain. His urgency transcended mine as did his distress, expressed in rolling, biblical phrases whenever we stopped at a traffic-light. He behaved as if we were rushing to a death bed; more, as if by getting to this hotel in good time we could avert some cosmic disaster. The terrible thing, the thing that by the end of our ride had begun to make me feel thoroughly small, was that his anxiety - his genuine anguish - was for *me*, on *my* behalf, and I was incapable of feeling as deeply as he assumed I did. I was worried, but beside his deep, shaking concern mine was a thin, febrile emotion, a foolish, trickling stream beside a deep river.

When we ran out of petrol crossing Waterloo Bridge, he almost wept. 'This is terrible - terrible,' he muttered as we

stood on the pavement watching the hired cabs fly past, mopping his sodden forehead and waving his arms like an elephant practising semaphore. When one finally stopped he pounced on the door, thrust me through it and said to the driver, 'This is a highly important matter. This gentleman is on high Government business.'

The driver raised his eyebrows as he flicked down his flag. As we sped away, I could see Thomas through the blue glass of the back window, standing mournfully hunched over his little car. His immense size made it look like a child's toy, as if he could have lifted it with one hand.

*

At sixteen minutes past one, we got to Kunz's hotel. It was Brown's, which explains I suppose, in a Chestertonian way, why I had not remembered it. Kunz had gone. The receptionist was apologetic. Mr Kunz had regretted that his schedule was tight. He and the other gentlemen had left to catch a plane at two forty-five.

Kunz had left a note, friendly but cool. They had waited as long as they possibly could. He did so hope nothing unfortunate had happened to me. He was mine, sincerely.

There was a cab on the rank. We got to London Airport in time to see Kunz's plane take off into the cold sky. At least, to satisfy my dramatic sense, I assumed it was Kunz's plane. It might have been any plane, a heavy, silver bird setting off for Nassau, Tokyo, Bangkok – or simply the wide, blue yonder.

I asked the driver to wait and telephoned Louise to tell her I had spent a lot of money and probably lost the job.

'You must be absolutely mad,' Reggie said.

Or, rather, he didn't say it. Not in actuality, anyway. But it was his hard, implacable tones speaking these words – and endless, sneering variants of them – that rang through my head all that long, cold afternoon; driving back from the airport, giving my lecture to the third year students and later, sitting at my desk miserably trying to compose a letter to Kunz that would steer a dignified course between justification and apology.

The harsh voice condemned me for my general lack of sense, initiative and normal go-getting aggressiveness, for my irresponsibility, for my peculiar inability to put first things first. Reggie marched my sins of impotence before me like malingers on a sick parade. As advocate, I could only excuse them plaintively. It was hindsight that made my folly and stupidity more apparent in this instance than usually. Even without my intervention, Jay would have got off with a small fine. But I was not to know that, was I? All right. If I had to rush off to the police court to rescue this young fool, couldn't I have asked if there was some way of giving evidence without being present? And how on earth could I have been so unutterably careless as to have forgotten Kunz's telephone number? Why had I not thought to ring Hilton who would certainly have known it? I don't know, I felt ill, I had a headache, I answered weakly and heard Reggie's magnified, masculine snort of contempt roll round the tender balloon of my throbbing head.

Hilton was kind; embarrassed and regretful because I was,

after all, his protégé, but kind. He understood perfectly how I had been placed but, in the circumstances, it was unfortunate. Kunz was not the best man to have let down in this fashion. Though an extremely nice man he was meticulous himself and inclined to be irritable when other people were more casual. But he would write to him. There were one or two things that he could perhaps say that I couldn't. I had been overworking, of course, he had thought that for some time. Etc., etc.

This courteous, gentlemanly attempt to excuse and shield me made me feel guilty. As guilty as Louise's outburst on the telephone had made me. 'Oh, damn Jay, *damn* him,' she had cried – though it was not *that* that suddenly made me feel guilty but the fact that she had apologized almost immediately and said of course she understood and she didn't blame him, really, or me. What else could I have done? Her readiness to hide her natural disappointment started up shame in me; was I so touchy, so difficult, that she was afraid to let me see how she really felt? She was too gentle, too anxious to please. She lacked aggressiveness though Reggie, being an old-fashioned, Anglo-Saxon male would not condemn *her* for this. Women, in his view, were charming menials whose sole part was to be unaggressively bonny and buxom in bed and at board as the old marriage service had it. . . .

But was I any better than Reggie? Didn't she often treat me in much the same nervous way that she treated him – as if we were a pair of ravening male beasts of uncertain temper? Look at that incident of the car this morning! Had I given her reason to think I might be 'angry' because it had a flat tyre? Of course I had. Memory supplied occasions eagerly – I was anxious to convict myself of swinishness – occasions when I had been pettily spiteful or deliberately cruel, work-

ing off on poor Louise not only sexual frustration but other frustrations that had nothing to do with her. I had often wanted to hit her and seen her flinch as if she knew it, as she flinched from Reggie who had often, when they were children, twisted her arm and pinched her (till she was black and blue, Julia had once told me, with an odd air of pride). My private, glorified image of myself as a gentle character, the benign champion of the weak, the defender of the exploited, the opposer of violence, was only an hypocrisy. Even my vehemence against Reggie, my using him as a symbol of all I overtly affected to hate, was simply a refusal to recognize my own sadistic potential. Or did I attack him because I really wanted to be like him, because in my heart I believed that to ride rough-shod over people, to be competitive, decisive and domineering, meant you were a Man and not a tame tabby?

In the centre of all this wallowing there was a core of self-doubt like the plump kernel of truth in the middle of any wrinkled old platitude. I suppose I did sneakily admire Reggie – or the type of man he stood for in my mind – if only because he seemed content to be no different from what he was. But if I had not been so inordinately depressed and beginning to be ill I would probably have told myself that men often did more harm than tame tabbies and that on the whole pretensions to virtue – or, at any rate, to virtuous behaviour because what counts, finally, is not what you are but what you do – were better than no pretensions at all.

But I *was* ill, I *was* depressed, in a black, self-hating, self-despising mood. If I had not been, things might have worked out differently.

*

To my surprise, Louise met me at the station. To my further surprise – how could she want to? – she kissed me quickly

before she said, 'Darling, you're horribly late. I've been waiting ages. I've got to go and see Mother. She's in bed with 'flu. Some bug or other, anyway.' She looked at me. 'You don't look too bright yourself. You take the car home. I'll go by Tube.'

I protested, but she said the Tube was quicker anyway, opened the car door, took my brief-case from me and tossed it in the back. She didn't, I noted gloomily, appear as crushed as my imagination had made her. 'I'm sorry I was horrid on the telephone,' she said. 'Do you really think you won't get the job now?'

'I don't know. It depends.'

'Oh, well. No use crying over spilt milk.' She grinned at her motherly wisdom. 'I had a terrible time explaining to Reggie. He's at home now, seeing to supper. We we had rather a row.'

'You did? With Reggie?'

She laughed. 'It's all right now. He won't start it up with you. He's quite humbled.' Her eyes danced, her whole face seemed to glow both with the cold and a strange, inner excitement. 'Though I *must* tell you – among other things he said you must be a homosexual. To have dropped everything and rushed. . . .'

'I get the point. I hope you put him right. Though you'd hardly know, would you?'

I don't know why I said that. However badly I may have treated Louise, I'd never before taunted her with frigidity – if it was frigidity and not boredom. It was something that made me ashamed and angry and bitter and though I may have blamed her in the moments when she rebuffed me – she made me feel like some brutal rapist – I had never consciously blamed her at other times. I can only think I was still wallowing in the character I'd been creating for myself

all afternoon, like a small boy putting on belligerence with his cowboy suit.

I said at once, 'I'm sorry, I didn't mean——'

'It doesn't matter,' she said quickly, stepping back from the car door. 'Don't wait supper for me, you know what Mother is when she's ill.'

'All right.' I watched her go into the Tube entrance, walking briskly, her head held high.

*

I drove home and found Reggie, wearing one of Louise's aprons and straining potatoes into the sink. His domestic appearance was startling as was the solicitous haste with which he offered me a glass of my own gin.

'You look a bit washed out,' he said.

He had already been drinking quite heavily. I noticed this with some surprise because Reggie, though a steady, routine drinker was seldom an immoderate one. His speech was slightly slurred and as we sat by the fire he told me three rather tedious dirty jokes, produced one after the other with the inconsequential haste of a nervous after dinner speaker. He *was* nervous, I realized. Perhaps the row with Louise had shaken him – of course it must have done, as much as if one of the comfortable arm-chairs he was used to sitting on had suddenly jumped up and bitten him. But whatever she had said to him it had been remarkably effective, I thought with an inward chuckle. The malevolent phantom of my imagination was treating me with exaggerated caution, as a consciously clumsy porter might handle a fragile package. When, finally, he cleared his throat loudly and said, 'I'm sorry about the job, old man. Rotten luck. Really rotten luck,' I could have laughed aloud.

We ate supper, stew and potatoes, and Reggie offered to wash up but this seemed to be carrying his reformation too far: I insisted we stack the dishes in the sink. I made coffee, very strong and black, and got out the brandy. Reggie might have had enough to drink, but I hadn't. I hoped brandy might cure this curious sensation of being enclosed inside a bubble – one of those soap bubbles children blow in the bath, watery and slightly wrinkled. I floated inside it, detached, and extremely observant of small particulars. Reggie's left hand had a small brown mole I had not noticed before and his fingers, tenderly encircling the balloon of his glass, had spiky brown hairs growing along them. His waistcoat was made of some kind of woollen material that was hairy too; it had fine, silvery, silken hairs that quivered as his stomach rose and fell.

He shifted a little uneasily in his chair – perhaps I was staring at him – and said, 'Louise is late.'

'I expect Julia's keeping her. If she's feeling really wretched. . . .'

'I *hope* that's where she is,' he said, oddly, and then looked at me. His expression was sly, or shy, I couldn't determine which and this bothered me. If I answered him, I can't remember what I said.

The next thing I do remember is that he suddenly pronounced in a thoughtful voice, 'Women are funny. . . .'

From inside the bubble, this remark seemed extremely humorous. 'Kittle-kattle?' I suggested.

He nodded, not smiling. 'I suppose only another woman can really understand them. It's a pity Louise hasn't any really close women friends. Someone she could talk to.'

'She has. But they're busy with their children,' I said shortly.

'She must know a few who aren't. There *are* other women without children.'

'Yes. But they're not usually Louise's type. She's not a committee girl.'

'Perhaps not. Though it's a pity. . . .' He sipped at his brandy and sighed. 'Of course, she's naturally maternal. Always was. Not all girls are – Veronica, you know, was a regular tomboy, never played with dolls. But Lou was mad about 'em. I remember Mother getting the carpenter in to put up extra shelves in her room so she could have them all sitting up and looking at her. It was like a ruddy *shop*. And every single one had to be dressed and undressed every blessed day. . . .'

And you used to poke their eyes in, I thought. . . .

Maybe he remembered this too. He gave an uneasy, whistling grunt and moved clumsily in his chair as if to divert his own attention from an unfortunate memory.

'I know it's been a great disappointment to you both.' He spoke with charitable reflectiveness but his small eyes shot me a sly glance. 'But I wonder I wonder if you and I can really understand what it means to a woman who wants children to be deprived of them. That sort of thing goes deep. Very deep.' He wagged his head slowly. 'I daresay that where Louise is concerned it explains a lot.' Again, that nervous, darting glance. 'Of course,' he went on hastily, 'one can't excuse her behaviour, but one must try to make allowances.'

I was puzzled. This was a new version of the 'poor Louise' saga. And one, apparently, in which I was not to be cast in my usual role of villain. Then I realized that for some queer reason Reggie was apologizing for her. Why? *Of course* – the solution seemed brilliantly funny – he was 'making allowances' for her because she had dared to quarrel with him.

But it wasn't that. He said, in a courteous, melancholy voice, 'Though for God's sake - I don't know why I should say any of this to *you*. You've been understanding enough in all conscience.'

I had the feeling that I had stayed too long in the theatre bar and missed some crucial part of the action. I said, 'Is there any reason why I shouldn't be?'

'Oh - come now. There's no need to be as understanding as *that*.' I was aware of a certain confused irritation which he was manfully trying to control. He succeeded, temporarily anyway. His voice remained low and solemnly reasonable. 'I know you profess to be very modern in your outlook and all that, but I think I can guess what you must be feeling. After all, it came as a terrible shock to *me*. I appreciate that you don't want to discuss it. I admire you for that. I just want you to know that I think it's damn decent of you to have taken it like this. And I told Louise so. A lot of men would have kicked her out. Not that they would have been right, mind you, no one's perfect and quite decent people do kick over the traces from time to time. Though on the other hand, there's such a thing as being too understanding. I mean to say, if *my* wife had played Fast and Loose under my own roof. . . .'

This thought was too much for him. Through a fog of bewilderment I saw the colour rise heatedly into his already colourful face. 'At least I know damn well I wouldn't have lifted a finger to keep her lover out of prison.'

I held my breath. He didn't know what he was telling me; he wasn't drunk, but drink had diminished his perception. (Mine too, as it turned out.) Did he believe what he was saying? I couldn't believe it but I couldn't not believe it either. It was like the moment in a nightmare when you know you

are dreaming but cannot escape from the horrid reality of it.

I said, with an absurd, hiccoughing laugh, 'I'd have thought that was just what you *would* have expected of me. Knowing my tendencies. . . .'

His face seemed to drain of blood in patches, leaving his skin mottled red and a curiously livid yellow. 'God,' he moaned, 'I only——'

'Never mind that. Did Louise tell you that she and Jay were lovers?'

'Do you mean to say you didn't know that?' he said, with ludicrous, jaw-dropping astonishment.

'Did you believe it?' I asked. 'Louise will say almost anything to gain a point.' And I to gain time, I thought.

He looked momentarily hopeful, then he shook his head. 'Not *this*. I don't think she – oh, damn it, I don't know.' His face was screwed up in an expression of acute discomfort. 'Oh, God, oh, God,' he said, as though keening to himself.

'What exactly did she say?'

'We were – arguing. I can't remember.' He glanced at me furtively and I almost laughed in his face. Did I expect him to admit that he had called me a pervert? He said, 'I suppose I goaded her. Oh – I'm damn sure I did. I wish to God I'd kept my fat mouth shut.' He fumbled for his handkerchief and mopped at his forehead. 'Believe me, Tom, I'd never have said a word if I hadn't believed it.'

'You'd have connived at her deception?' I said, rather pleased with the clever phrasing of this question. My mouth felt clotted and dry, but inside the bubble nothing real was happening.

He answered with ponderous dignity. 'Naturally, if my

sister had told me something in confidence, I would never have repeated it.'

This minor pinprick went home. *My sister.* 'Damn you,' I said. 'Even if I'd known this – I don't say I believe it, mind you – but even if I *had* known it, what conceivable business is it of yours? What right have you to prattle on at me like some – some aunty in an advice column?'

'I didn't mean to interfere,' he said, quite humbly. 'I only wanted to – to apologize. On behalf of her family. And put in a word for her, I suppose.'

'And get in a dig or two at me along the way?'

'That's not fair,' he said.

There was a long silence. Finally, he said nervously, 'What are you going to do?'

'Do?'

The question honestly surprised me. Since I felt nothing, I could hardly be expected to act: action has to have some spring of emotion. I supposed I believed what Reggie had told me but only in the way a cybernetic machine registers a cold fact: in human terms it meant nothing. Once, just after the war, a colleague of mine had had both legs amputated above the knee. I visited him in hospital and he said he couldn't believe it yet. He still lay in bed and wriggled his toes. What had happened to me felt as unreal as that. Louise was still my wife, Jay was still my friend. I thought of them with love, without anger: my non-existent wife, my non-existent friend.

'What would you do, chum?' I said. I looked at Reggie and suddenly I did feel something. Hate. I hated him. It was a pleasantly simple emotion. 'I know what you'd do,' I said, and told him, in a series of neat, well-turned phrases exactly what *he* would do, in my place, both to Louise and to Jay.

Or what he would like to do. 'You'd enjoy that, wouldn't you?' I said. 'You're the pervert, my friend. . . .'

His face was now a uniform, dull red. His hands were clenched on his fat knees. He said slowly, 'I'm ignoring every word of that, Tom. You've had a terrible shock. I understand that. I shall forget everything you've said.'

'Why? I'd rather you didn't forget it. I'd like you to remember it, in fact, because I've told you exactly the sort of man I think you are. A pimp. A *royeur*. This whole evening has given you a dirty little thrill, hasn't it? You've enjoyed thinking about what you would do if you were me. And for all your unctuous talk about admiring me for my forbearance, underneath you despise me because you know I'm not likely to beat Louise up. Or kick Jav in the balls. Don't you? You've always despised me. Why can't we both be honest for once?'

He sighed deeply. It seemed to shake his whole body. 'All right,' he said. 'Since the gloves are off - I'll tell *you* something. You won't do anything about this situation because in the first place you haven't the guts to do anything and in the second place because you're a masochist. You like being hurt and humiliated. It gives you no end of a kick, knowing your wife has gone to bed with someone else. It gives you a chance to be a creeping Jesus. Particularly since she's gone to bed with a black man. You'd like to crawl to him and say thank you - thank you for not despising my wife's white skin. You make me sick. You always have made me sick.'

I finished my brandy and stood up. My head seemed suddenly marvellously clear. I felt as if I were walking on air.

'Where are you going?' he said.

'Never you mind.' I stopped at the door. 'I'd like you to answer one question, though. Honestly, if you can. Do you

draw a moral distinction between a woman who is unfaithful to her husband with a European, and one who is unfaithful with a black man ?’

There was a silence. Reggie’s eyes bulged at me.

‘Tell me, Reggie,’ I said. ‘I’d really like to know.’

‘You must be absolutely mad,’ he muttered.

THE man in the pub said, 'I have learned to live with pain.'

He was small, white-faced, with a thin, nervous smile. I had no idea what he was talking about, nor how our conversation had started. It didn't matter. He was only a figure in the dream, as I was; the dream that was not even happening to me.

'They taught me that during the war, the bastards,' he said with a venomous, challenging intensity as though I had openly disbelieved him and I was surprised – as surprised as you can be in a dream – because he seemed too young for that. Though, looking at him closely, he might have been any age: the hair that I had thought was ash blond, could as easily be grey. But you wouldn't normally look at him closely. His town pallor, his dun-coloured clothes, cheap shirt and thin, string tie, made him anonymous, a bleached and lonely creature, the sort to seek out strangers in a bar and be forgotten instantly. Unless you noticed his eyes.

They were a pale sherry brown, without depth – or, rather, the depth was hidden by a kind of film like the opaque skin of ice on a puddle. Those eyes had a cold, snake-life of their own. They darted with hate. Whatever he said, whatever gesture he might make to assert a gentler emotion, they would deny it. His lips smiled as he sidled along the bar to offer me a cigarette out of a tin case, but the glacial look remained in his eyes, locked and permanent.

I could recognize hate. Ever since I had marched out of the house tricked by Reggie's last words into a ridiculously blown up anger, I had been caught up in it; trapped in a raging,

sick hatred, a feeling so hard and powerful that it seemed to have its own life, frightening and obdurate. It frightened *me*. Though I had driven to Brixton with the conscious intention of confronting Jay and demanding the truth, unconsciously, I suppose, I was trying to escape from this hatred, from this hideous, live thing within me over which I had no control and in which I was lost, helpless as a speck of dust in a whirlwind. It was the worst kind of nightmare – far, far worse than the nothingness of Moon Country; a nightmare of cruelty and violence, of righteous, bloody flame scouring the whole, dirty earth. I wanted to wound, to kill, to cancel my own pain.

When I saw Jay, through the window of the café, the unreality moved aside for a moment. I woke from my hateful dream to see him sitting at a table and placidly eating, his book propped up on a bottle of sauce. I stood there for a minute or two, shivering and sweating but feeling nothing at all except a curious shyness, and then I crossed the road and went into the pub and found I hadn't escaped the nightmare after all. It was here, waiting for me in the eyes of this man. What did he hate, and why? My hate made flesh, I thought, and then · you fool, you're drunk.

The man said, 'You don't believe me, do you? I tell you I can stand pain. I've trained myself. I watched my father die of cancer. He used to scream when the drugs gave out. I could stand even that. I've trained myself.'

A knot of men at the far end of the bar had stopped talking and were watching us. I recognized Edward Jones, his face wine-red beneath the dirty bandages. He looked at me steadily for a moment before he turned his back on me. His cronies continued to eye us with an odd, malicious expectancy.

I said, 'I'm sure it's possible. Men can learn to stand anything. Or almost anything. Though whether——'

The man smiled at me. 'I'll prove it to you,' he said in an easy, conversational voice.

He laid his hand flat on the bar counter, took the lighted cigarette out of his mouth and ground it, slowly and deliberately, into his open palm. His eyes were fixed on me, hard and glittering, but his face was expressionless. For a second I thought it must be some kind of trick but then he brushed the black ash away and exposed the raw wound.

I said helplessly, 'For God's sake——'

He lit another cigarette and puffed at it, blowing the smoke out through his nose. His eyes – those dreadful eyes – never left my face. He knew that I knew what he was going to do and it amused him. He also knew that although I was horrified and sickened, I wanted him to do it, that I couldn't move or take my eyes away. I stood there, trembling with shocked excitement, while he stubbed out the second cigarette, rubbing it round and round on his bleeding palm. He doubled his fist momentarily, then he opened it and held it out to me, smiling. Then he picked up his beer with his uninjured hand and walked back to the group at the other end of the bar. He said something and one of them laughed.

The landlord said, 'He's a nut case, that one. Makes you sick, don't it?' He spoke out of the side of his mouth like a gangster in an old movie. He had a rough, corrugated face, irregularly covered with lines and creases like the contours of a hilly country.

'A bit,' I said. 'I think I'll have another brandy.'

His grin wrinkled his face, closing the map-contours until the hills must have been almost perpendicular. 'Well, he's good for business, anyway.' He checked himself and added,

primly as any maiden aunt, 'Though it's not very nice, is it? I mean, it puts you off, the first time.' He looked at me. 'I know you. You were in last night with that nig who started the trouble.'

'I don't think he started it.'

'Maybe not,' he said quickly. 'Trouble's easy to start round here.'

'I'd like that brandy,' I said, annoyed by his meaninglessly conciliatory manner.

'Sorry. I'll forget my head next.' He looked at me again. 'Not ill, are you?'

'No. Bit of a cold, that's all.'

A moment ago I had been on the point of vomiting. Now, suddenly, I felt remarkably well, cleansed and purified like a drunk who has doused his head with water. It was as if the little man's disgusting exhibition had somehow purged me, vanquished the nightmare of hatred and violence by showing me its pointless, stupid face. (This was how I rationalized the feeling, anyway.) I drank the brandy quickly and gave the change to charity, perversely disregarding the blind's stocking and the spastic's lighthouse for the simple pleasure of watching the gaily painted dog shoot pennies off its nose into the R.S.P.C.A. kennel.

The landlord said, in a polite undertone, 'If you don't mind me mentioning it, I should tell your friend to keep away for a night or two. Nothing personal. As a matter of fact, I don't mind the nigs. They bring in a bit of life. But we don't want trouble, do we?'

'Is there likely to be any?' I asked, but he had given me his chronically apologetic, crumpled grin and moved away to serve Jones and his chums at the other end of the bar, before I had finished my sentence. Apart from them – and me – the

pub was empty and when Jones said in a voice that sounded challengingly loud but wasn't really, 'And a whisky for this gentleman here,' I realized that all the time I had been talking to the landlord their voices had been deliberately subdued. Except when that masochistic little horror had been performing his party piece. *Then* they had been silent and watching. He was sitting on a stool now, in the middle of the group, and when Jones handed him his whisky – presumably his payment for annoying me – he gave me his cold, lipless grin. 'Our black brothers,' he said, raising his glass, 'and their friends.'

There was a silence. Then Jones laughed, rather uncomfortably I thought, and his eyes sought mine. They had a furtively triumphant look. It surprised me slightly that, with his reputation, he should have been content with such a childish revenge. It would have been more in character, surely, if he had accosted me as soon as he recognized me, which had presumably been as soon as I entered the pub? Perhaps he didn't really bear me any malice, but I doubted that. Perhaps he simply hadn't drunk enough to be belligerent yet. It might be as well to get out before he had I thought, and grinned to myself. I called out good night as I left and got silence for answer.



'I am ashamed,' Jay said. 'I should have telephoned you, Tom, but after this morning I was deathly tired. When you had taken me back, I went to my room and slept. I slept all afternoon, until just a little time ago.'

He looked, not well, but rested. His neat suit and clean white shirt apologized for his still hideous eye, as if for some unfortunate, minor mishap.

I felt jealous of his sleep. The brief burst of well-being I had experienced in the pub had not lasted. My legs and arms ached almost unbearably, little sledge-hammers of pain had started up inside my skull and I could feel my eyes beginning to dart involuntarily, in the first stages of drunkenness. I began to tot up how much I had drunk. Not so much, surely? Two brandies in the pub, two with Reggie. A gin before dinner. How many gins? It seemed enormously important to remember.

‘. . . and Mrs Latour put a piece of beefsteak on my eye,’ Jay was saying. ‘It is a quaint old remedy in England, apparently.’

‘You put it on warts too. Bury it at midnight,’ I muttered, too low for him to hear.

‘What?’ he said, leaning towards me.

‘Nothing. It doesn’t matter.’ I shook my head impatiently. The movement was sharply agonizing; I felt tears come into my eyes.

He was looking puzzled. Why was he puzzled, I thought? And then it occurred to me that it was because I was behaving so oddly. It wouldn’t occur to him that I might be drunk. He had never seen me drunk. You don’t know anything about me, do you, I thought. I don’t know anything about you. It’s a joke, isn’t it? Here we are, sitting together in this café with the green walls and the plastic-topped tables, pretending we know something about each other when we don’t know the first thing. We open our mouths and talk but it is as if we spoke into a telephone receiver without knowing the lines are down. A warm, slatternly sadness swept over me.

Jay said hesitantly, ‘It was good of you to come, Toni.’

‘Thought I ought to see how you were,’ I said, aware, as

of two equally important things, that I was slurring my words and that I had not, in fact, come to see how he was. Suddenly the reason I had come was ludicrous. What had I intended to say? Have you been sleeping with my wife? The thought of myself, walking into this café and saying these words to this – this stranger, stirred up internal, ghostly laughter. Reggie's red-faced disclosure, my own violent reaction to it, seemed grossly unreal, something that had gone on in another existence and had not even happened to me. Or if it had happened to me, perhaps it was still happening. Perhaps I was still there, locked in that other world. I could not be both there and here and there was no connection, not the thinnest thread, between that Tom Grant and this Tom Grant. But who was Tom Grant? Suddenly I had the feeling that my body was insubstantial and weightless, a thin, transparent shell, revealing the emptiness within. I was an envelope that flapped empty, to be filled – invaded – by other people's more robust reality, clamouring, shouting conflicting instructions, giving the envelope a false impression of independent life. Reggie. His hoarse, strident voice bawled loudest. I was inventing these sensations, these sick dreams – I had deliberately chosen to be drunk in order not to face up to the issue. Had I? Should I shout, with Reggie's importunate voice at this so-called friend of mine, this black man sitting on the opposite side of the table and calmly spooning sugar into his tea?

Jay was talking. Apart from that one look of puzzlement, there was no sign that he had noticed anything odd about me. I could hear his voice, and then, with a great effort of concentration, what he was saying.

'... so of course it worries me that she should be alone. Women do not like to be alone at these times. Especially

when they are ill. Though she has not asked me to come home. She only writes about her hope that she will have a daughter. She has always wanted a daughter.'

The world seemed to be slithering away from me. I gripped the table top and was surprised to hear a voice – my voice – sounding quite normal, though rather far away.

'Do you mean Agnes is having a baby?' I said, fatuously congratulating myself on remembering her name. I had so completely forgotten her existence, thinking of Jay only as he touched my own life, that it was a shock to recall that there were other lives touching his, and lives beyond those lives, circle upon circle moving away into distance. . . .

'Of course.' He sounded surprised. 'I was explaining that I may have to terminate my course. She has really been unwell. . . . Are you all right, Tom?'

'Perfectly,' I said, and, as if in contradiction, the floor began to move gently under me in a kind of slow, surging waltz. Impressions swarmed into my head from far and near, jostling each other like a crowd in the Tube station at rush hour: Jay's face, bright and small like a miniature colour slide, his closed, bruised eye, the blue and grey of his tie revolving slowly with the dancing floor; a globe turning with myself upon it, blindfold, my hands tied; Miss Florence's hairy wart and my mother's hair in earphones and her voice saying, surprisingly, '*Do-as-you-would-be-done-by*', as she executed a stately dance on the moving floor, swinging round the bilious walls of the café, mad as Bedlam; the smell of the café which managed to be both oily and hygienic at the same time, pervasive and inescapable as fog. I felt I would never smell anything else again but suddenly we were out in the street and I could smell frost and soot and feel the cold air freezing the hair in my nostrils and Jay's arm round my waist, steadying me, and

the sharp pain as I knocked my bare knuckles against the door of my car. Jay was leaning me against it. I lurched and he held me up so that we stood close together like a pair of lovers while he fumbled in my jacket pocket. Something jangled, my keys. He opened the car door and helped me in; the steering wheel jabbed maliciously against my chest. 'Move over,' he said, bending over me, and then for some reason he was no longer there.

I heard a kind of growl, an animal sound outside the car. Jay said, 'Tom, look —' and then his voice was cut off like a snapped wire; there was a thud and the scuffling sound of feet. Someone laughed.

I felt a dim curiosity, the sort of curiosity you might feel about the thuds and whines coming from someone else's television screen. I leaned sideways so that I could look out of the car and what I saw moved me faster than I would have thought I was capable of moving just then, even though a small, ironic voice was saying from somewhere inside me: well, what do you think *you* can do about it?

Jay was on the ground, his head hanging sickeningly over the edge of the kerb and two men appeared to be kneeling over him and punching him in the stomach. Edward Jones, standing on the far side of them, said with relish, 'We'll have a word with you in a minute, mate,' and then I saw that the little man, the comic turn of the pub, was standing with his back half turned to me. I don't know how I did what I did then — indeed, I didn't consciously do it; it was as if my body had taken over and was acting quite independently of me. My left arm shot out, twisted the man round to face me and my right fist hit him in the face. I felt, rather than heard, a crunching sound, he went down and lay sprawled and moaning on the pavement. For a second I nursed my burning

knuckles, then astonishment at this extraordinary success produced a wild euphoria. It had *worked* – with the slickness of a fight on the cinema screen. Like some exultant, archetypal hero, I heard myself laughing fit to kill as I hit out at Jones who came for me, head lowered.

Of course I was no match for any one of them singly, let alone altogether. I am tall but far too light; after Jones's fist had cracked like a hammer on the side of my head, I knew my only hope was to keep them out of reach. And I couldn't do that for long. It was only a matter of minutes before someone waded in and finished me. Except that I hit one man a glancing blow in the throat – luck, not judgment – and saw him reel away making a gargling, retching sound, I did no other damage that I can remember; my blows were wind-milling, wildly aimed – a dervish dance rather than an honest brawl. I must have looked, and sounded, quite mad. Perhaps it was my stupid laughter that frightened them – madness is always frightening – or perhaps none of them had any real stomach for a fight. Whatever the reason, they had started to run before Jones – I'm sure it was Jones – landed me another one that caught me on the bridge of my nose and sent me skimming along the pavement like a child's stone along water, until I fetched up against a lamp-post with a crack that exploded the light into pinwheels and golden rain.

I heard Jay's voice saying, 'Tom, Tom,' and then saw, not Jay, but the landlord's old map of a face bending over me, his mouth pursed and making 'tch tch' noises, like a nursemaid whose charge has grazed his knee. I could smell his hair oil which had a scent like madonna lilies. It made me feel sick.

I sat up, saw that except for the three of us, the street was empty, and was sick into the gutter.

Jay crouched beside me. His white shirt was splotted with dirt and blood but he looked otherwise undamaged. He gave me his handkerchief; I wiped my face and was sick again.

The landlord said, 'I rang the police. They'll be along in a minute.'

Jay said, 'Oh, God.'

The landlord said, 'Dirty bastards.'

I looked at Jay. My head was full of a thick, greasy fog but deep inside it was a tiny point of clarity, thin but bright, like the beam of a pencil torch. I said, 'Could you get me a brandy?'

'Hang on a minute,' the landlord said. He shuffled off into his pub.

I said, to Jay, 'We'd better clear out. Give me a hand.' He didn't move, but stayed squatting on his haunches and I said, querulously, 'You don't want to get mixed up with the police, do you?'

He shook his head and helped me to my feet. My legs bent under me and I clutched at him.

'Sure you're all right?' he said. He steered me round the car and thrust me into the passenger seat.

'Fit as a fiddle,' I said drowsily. Once I was in the car, sitting down, this was almost true. I felt weak and silly but in no pain. All I wanted to do was to sit numbly in the car and go to sleep. Even with Jay driving.

He ground the gear into first and took off for the end of the street like a racing motorist. 'Wake me up when we get home,' I said.

'I am taking you to a hospital.'

I groaned. 'For God's sake. All I want is to go to bed and sleep.'

'That's why. You have hit your head.' He muttered to

himself as we went through a red traffic-light and then he said something that sounded like, 'I'm sorry for my fault.'

'Not your fault. Mine. It was me turning up in the pub that started it. All the same, you'd better keep out of their way.'

This took me a long time to say. My tongue felt furry and swollen in my mouth and the desire to sleep was sliding over me, soft and slippery, as if someone was smothering me with a warm, light eiderdown. I said, 'They'll be on the look-out. Not healthy. I shouldn't go back.'

'Where can I go?' His voice sounded strained, on the edge of panic.

I thought. It was an effort to think. He couldn't go home because Reggie was there. Surely he had other friends, somewhere else he could go? I said, 'I don't know. For God's sake - I'm not your nursemaid. Just clear out for a bit. You can take the car if you like. It's full of petrol.'

He started to say something but I didn't - or couldn't - pay attention. The cushiony softness of the eiderdown was winning now. I had the impression that my mouth was chock full of feathers. I couldn't speak without spitting them out and I was too tired.

I don't remember getting out of the car. All I remember is Jay helping me into a place where the lights were so bright that I had to shut my eyes. There were people there, they let me lie down and that was pleasant for a while until I became aware of a strange pain, sharp in the middle and woolly at the edges, that came whenever I breathed. I tried breathing shallowly, in short gasps, and this helped the pain but the light still bothered me, seeping through my closed eyelids and pressing painfully against my eye-balls, flat and bright like a sword. I wanted to ask someone to take the light away, but

when I spoke no one answered. I tried opening my eyes – it was a tremendous labour like pushing up the lid of a coffin – and saw I was lying in a sort of cubicle with a green curtain at one end and that terrible light, suspended from the ceiling in a white bowl. I was alone for a while with the brightness and the pain, and then there seemed to be a great many people doing things to me; some of the things they did were painful and some of them were humiliating, but in the end they stopped doing them and went away and let me go to sleep. It was nice going to sleep; there was even a kind of exhilaration about it. The eiderdown had gone from on top of me and was beneath me instead, a deep, dark softness into which I sank with consciously sybaritic pleasure.

*

Waking was a much more painful process. The light was there again, my face felt swollen and throbbing as if I had thrust it into a wasps' nest and there was a weight on my chest like an elephant. My hand hurt, too; I remembered that I had bruised it on the side of the car. All the same, I couldn't think why it should hurt quite so much and then I saw Louise was sitting beside me and holding onto it very tightly.

Her face, from below, looked triangular and white. Her nose was a pink blob, set in the middle of the white triangle. She had been crying.

She said, 'Does it hurt?'

'Everything hurts.' I tried to localize the pain on my face. 'My nose hurts,' I said.

'Poor darling. Oh, poor darling. It's only bruises, though. You should see yourself. But I didn't mean that. I meant your poor head.'

'What's wrong with my poor head?'

‘You’ve got concussion. And pneumonia. Trust you – not to do things by halves.’

The tender irritation in her voice made me feel curiously warmed, and a trifle smug. Then I remembered. It was like the moment after a party when the gin fumes clear and you remember what a fool you made of yourself. She was only being loving because I was ill. Hypocritical bitch. I tried, pettishly, to tug my hand away but she hung on to it, squeezing it painfully tighter, for good measure.

Then she frowned at me. ‘Oh – but my God – you really were ridiculous. It makes me hopping mad when I think of it. Such a *fool*.’ The colour came into her cheeks, her eyes sparked and she looked, suddenly, ominously angry. I felt apprehensive but all she said, in a voice like the crack of doom, was, ‘*Going out without your overcoat.*’

I wanted to laugh though I thought it would probably hurt. It did. The laugh came out as a hoarse, hooting noise. It was *she* who was ridiculous, but charmingly ridiculous; deliciously irrelevant, female and enchanting. At that moment I loved, not just Louise, but all women. They defeated life by reducing it to absurdity. I said, ‘I love you.’

I meant it, but it wasn’t enough. I said laboriously, ‘Whatever you’ve done, I love you. Nothing makes any difference, or ever could.’

Once I’d said that, I felt better. Not in a condescendingly virtuous way, but because somehow it made my own feelings clear to myself. I didn’t think I believed what Reggie had told me, I didn’t think I ever had believed it, but even if it were true I knew that it didn’t make a ha’porth of difference, finally. Sexual jealousy apart – and I was in no condition to feel sexual jealousy – I didn’t care. If Reggie’s wife went to bed with another man he could rant and roar, turn

her out if he wanted to. I didn't have to. Reggie might think me spineless and lacking in proper masculine pride. He could think what he damn well liked. I didn't care. I was myself, filled, not with Reggie's dimensions, but with my own. Suddenly I felt a marvellously luminous happiness; I wanted to share it with Louise. But all I said, was, 'I don't give a fig for Reggie or his swashbuckling ideas.'

She was bending over me with a puzzled look on her face. 'Of course you don't, darling. You never did.' Her bedside manner was perfect, indulgent and consoling. Then her colour deepened. She said in a shocked voice, 'Reggie didn't, I mean he didn't say anything?'

'No. You can tell him so, if you like.'

'Oh,' Her cheeks looked like two polished Christmas apples. She said, 'Tom, it wasn't – I can explain.'

'I'm sure you can. Don't, though. It would take too long.' I shut my eyes, thinking, how fortunate the sick are! They can always close their eyes and leave the healthy to feel guilty.

'All right.' I heard her voice, hesitant, slightly bewildered. 'Tom, you can go to sleep in a minute. I just want to know one thing. Where did you leave the car?'

'Jay took it,' I said. 'I told him to.' I opened my eyes. 'What's happened to him?'

IT was a long time before I knew the answer. At least, it seemed a long time, the eternity of an illness. In fact I was ill for ten days or so, ten days in which the world could have blown itself to smithereens for all I knew or cared. My consciousness was reduced to the limits of the private ward that Augustus, so I learned afterwards, had insisted on paying for, and for much of the time to the even narrower limits of my sweating, painful, itching body. The itching was the worst thing; it is always the humiliation, the small degradations of illness one remembers. Certainly there was no dignity, no heroic, sick-bed drama about what happened to me. I swelled up. I had reacted badly to some drug they gave me and swelled up in lumps like monstrously inflated flea bites. I lay there, suffering like Job, covered in drying calamine lotion and living for the times when the young nurse would come in with her clean, wholesome smile and her cool, unsexed hands and paint me with it again. For a few minutes after she had done that, I was comfortable, I felt as if I could lie, uncomplaining, until Doomsday, but then the itching would start again and the tossing and the hopeless attempt to find some clear corner of the sheets. Besides this, the pain in my chest seemed a minor affliction, though the drugs they gave me only removed the pain to the end of my bed where it sat for the duration, like some acquaintance you neither know nor care much about but for whom time and propinquity has produced a grudging respect.

Louise was there much of the time. Julia came several times, whispering at me in low, hoarse, hospital tones and

Augustus once : I remember him standing by the side of my bed, a dimly seen hulk, like a ship that looms up suddenly in a heavy fog before disappearing again. They were all, even Louise, intrusive shadows, without substance.

*

One morning I went to sleep after my calamine bath and woke up without itching or pain. Sun lay across my feet, the dust danced in the sun's beam and I felt wonderful; limp, weak, but wonderful.

Louise came. She was wearing a green tweed suit I hadn't seen before. I smiled at her. She said, 'You're better,' and came straight into my arms. With one hand I felt the delicate wing of her shoulder blade, with the other the warm curve where her waist flowed beautifully into her hip. Her cheek was cool against mine, she felt light and warm as down. I felt completely and contentedly happy, like an old owl in the sun. I could have stayed like that for ever.

But she sighed, moved her head, lifted it a little and smiled at me. 'I'm getting pins and needles,' she said.

She sat heavily on the side of the bed, pulling the blankets uncomfortably tight across me. She unbuttoned the jacket of her suit, wriggled, and tucked the blouse more neatly into the top of her skirt.

'That's new,' I said.

'Do you like it? Mother bought it. She met me outside the hospital and marched me into a shop. I think she was trying to cheer me up.' Her eyes filled. 'It seemed dreadful at the time, trying on clothes. I felt so heartless.'

'It doesn't seem to have spoiled your judgment. That's a very nice suit.'

She looked at me reproachfully. 'Don't be unkind. I thought you were going to die.'

'Disappointed?'

She caught her breath. Then she smiled. 'Of course, you horrible old man. Why – I'd re-arranged my life. They said you'd be all right, but I didn't dare believe it. It seemed safer to think the other thing. Like carrying an umbrella on a sunny day. *You* know.'

'Yes.' I laughed. I understood perfectly. 'What had you decided to do with your freedom?'

She giggled; she looked suddenly beautiful with happiness. 'I couldn't make up my mind whether to sell the house and go to live with Mother, or whether to stay on and take lodgers.'

'I don't see you as a landlady. You'd have done better to go on a cruise with Julia. She'd be bound to suggest something like that. To help you Forget. You'd almost certainly pick up some desirable widower. Someone rich this time.'

'An oil magnate or a wool millionaire. Sable and emeralds or mink and diamonds,' she said, and I felt a sudden stab of jealousy that bothered me. It was ridiculous that I could feel jealous of a hypothetical replacement when I had not felt jealous of Jay. But then I had no cause to feel jealous of Jay. Or had I?

I said huffily, 'I'm sorry to have deprived you of the opportunity,' and she looked hurt for a moment before she smiled in plump, pleased, rather annoying fashion. '*Idiot*,' she said. She opened her handbag, took out a thick, white envelope and laid it on my chest. There was a gleeful air of ceremony about the way she did this, like a little girl handing out the presents from the Christmas tree. 'That's for you, from Hilton. He said I was to give it to you as soon as you

are well enough. He's been awfully worried, he's telephoned every day.' She frowned and said in a stern, motherly voice. 'Everyone's been awfully worried about you, in fact. Even Veronica sent you a Get Well card. A rude, witty one with a plastic bed-pan attached. I don't know what I did with it, though, it didn't seem much of a joke at the time.'

'And Jay? Did he get the car back safe and sound?'

I spoke with a casualness that almost deceived myself. I was sure, now, that Reggie had been grotesquely misled; knowing that I wanted to believe this made me superstitiously nervous rather than suspicious. To say the least, this was a thorny area of misunderstanding I did not want to explore just yet.

But I was unprepared, all the same, for her reaction. The colour rushed into her face and her eyes went dark. She glanced at me and then looked away. She looked thoroughly bewildered – no, guilty. There was no other word. But guilty, I thought, in the way a child caught out in some misdemeanour looks guilty. Then I thought: don't comfort yourself. . . .

I said cravenly, 'Come on, love. Did he bash the car up? If he did, you can tell me. It's my fault.'

She shook her head. 'The car's all right.' Then added, too quickly, too brightly, 'Aren't you going to open your letter?'

'In a minute.' Surely she wouldn't act like this unless. . . . I felt my heart plummet down as a shot from a spring. I said feverishly, 'There's something wrong with Jay. He's hurt – he's had an accident.'

'No. Jay's not hurt.' Recovering herself, she gave an impatient sigh. 'Do stop *worrying*. Please, darling. You're ill. Look – if you're too lazy, I'll open your letter and read it for you.'

She put out her hand for the envelope and I caught her wrist.

'It'll keep. First, you tell me what's wrong. There is something wrong, isn't there?'

'You're hurting me,' she complained. I knew that; I had meant to hurt her. I let her go and she rubbed her wrist. 'All right,' she said in a resigned voice. 'I'll tell you. There's no dreadful secret. Only I wanted to wait till you were better.'

'I am better.'

Her eyes were anxious. 'Sure? You won't be silly and get upset – or angry? Promise?'

'What's happened? For God's sake, you're making me feel like someone in an ineffective Greek chorus. Get on with it.'

I felt tired, suddenly, sick and irritated, but in a distant, dream-like way. It seemed unlikely that I could rise to any more positive emotion than an invalid's preevishness.

'Jay's gone home. To Kenya.'

'I knew he was thinking of it. Agnes was ill. . . .'

'Yes. But that's not all. I'd better start at the beginning.' She sat up very straight. 'After he'd left you that evening, he did the oddest thing. He – he went to see your mother. He told Reggie afterwards that he'd met her before and she'd been charming to him. But I don't know. . . .'

'He had. She was. Mr Henderson,' I said, and found myself smiling. 'She thought he was Mr Henderson.' I looked at her puzzled face. 'It doesn't matter. I'll explain later. Go on.'

'Well – I don't know what time he turned up but it must have been awfully late. Your mother was in bed. She'd been restless all day and the doctor had given her something to make her sleep. That was lucky in a way because she slept

right through all the fuss and bother. Miss Foley had come in last thing, to see she was all right. *She* opened the door to Jay. I suppose it was a shock, seeing him. He looked so awful. Reggie said that even when he saw him the next morning and he'd cleaned up a bit, he looked terrible. There was blood and muck all over his clothes and he had this ghastly eye. Anyway, it was enough to frighten Miss Foley. She screamed and went on screaming apparently, and Jay got scared and started to run. A couple of neighbours caught him as he was running out of the gate. Of course they got the wrong idea, you couldn't blame them, and fetched the police. The police were quite sensible about it – I mean, they might not have been, considering the way he *looked*. They took him down to the station and telephoned us. I was at the hospital – you won't remember, but I was here till about four in the morning – so they spoke to Reggie.' She cleared her throat nervously. 'He said he didn't know what had happened – he didn't then – but he knew Mr Nbola was a friend of ours. Though he didn't know what he was doing with our car.' She looked at me. 'That was quite *reasonable*, Tom.'

'Oh, perfectly. One has a duty to protect other people's property. I can imagine just how Reggie sounded.'

'I daresay,' she said, rather dryly. 'But he's not as bad as you think. I told him, when I came home, that it was all right about the car. He went down next morning and sorted things out. The trouble was, the police wanted to prosecute Jay. . . .'

'For being forced to spend another night in a police station? For heaven's sake!'

'He hadn't a driving licence,' she said. 'Though I suppose they were fed up, too. Anyway, Reggie talked to Jay. He was pretty miserable. . . .'

'You surprise me.'

'Oh, don't be so stupid,' she said with a flash of anger. 'Don't be so bloody *clever*. You're not the only person who – of course he's had a lousy time and of course it wasn't his fault. Not all his fault, anyway. Though why on earth he went bursting down to your mother. . . .'

'I told him to clear out,' I said slowly. Then I thought of something. 'Surely you must have spoken to him earlier? I mean, he must have telephoned you?'

'Yes.' She looked uncomfortable. 'I'm afraid I wasn't very – I mean I was upset about *you*. After all, he did say it was his fault you'd got in this fight. He said, should he come to see me and I said no, Reggie was there and anyway I wasn't sure I particularly wanted to see him, just then. I wasn't angry, Tom, honestly, just a bit chilly, I suppose.' She put out a hand to me and I took it. She said, very low, 'All the same, I can't imagine why he should have gone to see your mother.'

'I can,' I said.

I could imagine it only too well. I even felt a humiliated physical shrinking as if I had telephoned Louise and come up against that cold wall of indifference. It wasn't Louise's fault. In a moment of crisis no one cares about anyone except themselves and the people closest to them, their wives, their husbands, their children. Her concern was for me; she shut him out. Afterwards he had got back into the car and sat there, perhaps for five minutes, perhaps for half an hour, fighting with loneliness and exhaustion and fear that grew – because fear is the emotion that grows fastest when you are alone: fear of the police, fear of Edward Jones, fear of my house, fear of his friends and of the whole of this cold, alien world where there was no one close, no wife, no child, to comfort him. There was nowhere he could go, nowhere he could escape from the twin enemies of violence and indifference.

Then he had remembered the only person who had said to him: come again, come any time. She might think he was someone else but it would be a relief to be someone else for a while; to be the friendly ghost of Mr Henderson, safe in a world of friendly ghosts. Perhaps when he had started he had not really meant to go there, perhaps it had just been a half-formed idea, an excuse to start driving, to travel somewhere, anywhere, to clear out, as I, his best friend, had told him to. But then, once he was out of London – past Lewisham, Blackheath, on the fast Maidstone road – he was afraid to stop because once he had stopped he would be alone again, in the dark, in the silence, with nowhere to go. So he had driven on, accelerating faster and faster, up Death Hill, along the new motorway down to Charing in Kent, then on the winding road to the Medway Bridge and the Thanet Way. It was a miracle that he had escaped both death and the law, but he had; he had got where he wanted to go, found the house, and walked up the little front path to the only person whose welcome he thought he could be sure of. . . . And she didn't open the door, she wasn't there. Only poor old Miss Foley, who screamed. . . .

'Damn, Miss Foley,' I said. 'Damn her for a silly bitch.'

'Don't Tom.' Louise looked at me. 'She's dead.'

'Dead?'

'She had a stroke. Not then, two days later. The doctor came to see your mother and Miss Foley wasn't there, so he broke in and found her. She was dead in bed.'

'Oh, my God,' I said.

She stroked the back of my hand. It's all right,' she said. 'Your mother's all right. Though she was terribly upset Miss Foley didn't come. She yelled at the doctor and threw ——'
'An inkstand?'

She grimaced. 'No. A kettle of boiling water. It didn't hit him, fortunately. He got help and they took her to hospital.' Her fingers went on stroking mine. 'Darling, it was the only thing to do. And she's all right. Mother went down to see -- I asked her to because I knew you'd worry. But she seemed quite happy and the nurses are nice. There's an Irish girl she's taken a great fancy to, apparently. She calls her Harriet. And she's on her own, in a nice room with a view of the sea. That was Reggie's doing. He got on to someone, pulled a few strings -- you know Reggie. He knew you wouldn't want her in a general ward.'

'No. I suppose it's all for the best,' I said. I felt nothing. I was floating in a warm sea of no-feeling. All for the best. A happy release. Did *she* feel that? How did she feel? I didn't know. I could never know. There was no magic button, no way of knowing. No meeting, no sharing.

Louise was looking relieved. 'I'm glad you see that, darling. I was so afraid you'd be upset. Though there wasn't anything else we could do, was there?'

'I suppose not.'

'Darling- — ' she began, and stopped.

I said, 'And what happened about Jay's driving licence? You may as well finish the serial. I suppose Reggie fixed that too. Reggie, the Fixer.'

'He did, as a matter of fact. He persuaded them not to prosecute. As Jay was going back home.'

'Did Reggie fix that too?'

'Not exactly. I don't really know, I mean I didn't see Jay until it was all decided. I think he did want to go. It wasn't just Agnes, though of course that was what he told the university. I think Reggie told him that if the police *did* prosecute, there might be trouble about his grant. I mean, the

authorities wouldn't be too pleased with him. So it seemed better, as Jay did want to be with Agnes, for him to go home straight away. It would keep his record clean, so if he wanted, he'd be able to take his grant up again later or apply for another. . . .' She hesitated. 'Reggie paid his fare, actually. Though he thinks the Kenya Government will probably refund it. Do you know what Reggie said after he'd gone? He said, "You know, he was really quite a decent sort of chap".' She waited a moment, then said with disappointment, 'I thought that would make you laugh.'

'It does. I'm laughing inside like a drain. I think Reggie's quite a decent chap, too. You can tell him so, if you like.'

'Tom, don't be horrid.'

'I didn't mean to be. What did he arrange about the boy? Or did he forget about Philip?'

'No one's arranged anything about Philip. Not yet. He's to spend the holidays with Georgiana. Then it depends. I said, we'd talk to his headmaster. He can stay for the year, longer, if it seems a good idea. But if he wants' - a small, mysterious smile hovered round her mouth - 'he can fly back with us, in the summer.'

'Oh,' I felt about on my chest and picked up Hilton's letter. I knew what was in it, I suppose I had known all the time. 'I've got the job, ha, n't I?' I said. It didn't seem to matter very much.

She nodded. 'You've got Hilton to thank. He telephoned Geneva and said you were ill and Kunz wrote back at once. When you're better you're to fly out and sit on an expert panel or appear before one, or something. You'll be the Project Team Leader.'

'I know the jargon,' I said.

'You are *pleased*, aren't you?'

‘Of course.

She kissed me, lightly. ‘I’m so glad, darling.’ Then she sat up and looked at me with a faint anxiety. ‘Really – it’s all worked out rather well, hasn’t it?’

I don’t know why this innocent remark should have provided a spur to anger, but it did. It wasn’t really anger, though, but a kind of sick disgust that seemed to be growing inside me like a fungus, a cancer, that was invading my whole body.

‘Marvellously,’ I said. ‘All’s well that ends well. One useless old woman is dead and another is tucked away in a nice, comfortable madhouse where she’ll never be any trouble to anyone any more, and one African clerk has gone back home so he’ll never bother us again, and because we’ve paid his fare and kindly promised to keep an eye on his child, our consciences are clear. And that’s a good thing, because we’re the important people, the ones who matter, you and Reggie and I. We’re not old or mad or black. We haven’t got any of the obvious disabilities but we’re prepared to be nice to the unfortunate ones who have, because we’re nice people and it gives us a nice, comfortable glow, but it’s really pleasanter when they’re not there, cluttering up the landscape, isn’t it? We’re the flower of the flock – the – the King’s Cows, good, fat cattle grazing in our green meadow and it’s nicer when all the insignificant people, the unimportant ones, are tucked away behind the hedges where they won’t spoil the view or interfere with our digestive processes. We’re for the slaughterhouse in the end, of course, but it doesn’t worry us just now because our bellies are full. One day we’ll be old or mad – or both, probably, but we don’t care, our tiny minds don’t reach so far.’

She was standing now, her expression pained and be-

wildered. She said, 'Tom, *don't*. Please. There was nothing else we could do. And don't blame Reggie. He did his best.'

'I'm not blaming Reggie. Not only Reggie, anyway. You and me. *Me*.' I sat up in bed and shouted absurdly, 'How many neighbours have I loved like myself, for God's sake?'

'Tom. Darling. . . .' She came close, her face suddenly flooded with gentle understanding. She put her hand on my forehead and said in a worried voice, 'I think you must have got a temperature.'

OF course, in the end it did work out rather well. Or, to put it another way, guilt and shame went underground.

While I was in hospital, I was obsessed by terrible images of my mother, lost, torn from her familiar surroundings, heart-broken and weeping. Instead, when I went to visit her, I found her calm and cheerful, planting bulbs in a tiny patch of earth they had given her in a corner of the grounds. It was about ten foot square; she had edged it with white, broken shells.

She did not recognize me, at least she gave no sign of doing so, and when I asked her about her plans for the garden she answered me gently and politely with something of the air of a dowager duchess showing a common member of the public round her family estate. After a while, we sat down on a bench and she went to sleep with the suddenness of the old. She looked relaxed and peaceful in the thin sunlight. She was neatly dressed, someone had done her hair and polished her nails; she looked, not just efficiently, but affectionately, cared for. Yet, watching her, I felt guilt. Why? The feeling was formless, but in a queer way worse than the ordinary shame you feel for some specific wrong you have done. What could I have done for her that I hadn't done? No one would accuse me. Could I honestly accuse myself? Wasn't it just pride that produced this nagging remorse – as if I rated myself too high, believed my standards to be better than other people's?

But no amount of argument could dispel the guilt, which

was as pervasive and clinging as mist. I felt guilty about my mother, about Jay. . . .

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Jay did not write for a while, for a couple of months, in fact, but when his letter did come, it was charming: sunny and hopeful. He had been delighted to hear I was well again. All was well with him, he had been promoted and was to spend a year in Nairobi. Agnes had had a daughter and they were going to call her Louise. He hoped this would give us pleasure. He thanked us both for all we had done for him and what we were doing for Philip. He had been proud to make two such good friends and he looked forward with — his writing was difficult to read but it looked like ‘palpitating’ joy to welcoming us to his country. Naturally he would expect us to spend as long as we could with him, in his new house in Nairobi.

Louise said, ‘I think that’s a very nice letter. You see, he doesn’t blame you for anything.’

‘I blame myself,’ I said.

She looked at me consideringly. ‘You’re bound to feel depressed. It’s natural, after an illness like that.’

‘You think I’m still sick, do you?’

‘Not really. You’ve just got a sort of hang-over. All this gloom and breast-beating and thinking everything that’s wrong in the world is your fault. Healthy people don’t——’

‘Don’t they? I should have thought it was the people who went around saying everything is for the best, who were sick. I should have thought it was healthier on the whole to be chronically ashamed.’

It was meant to make her laugh, or half meant to make her laugh, anyway.

But she said seriously, 'You believe that, don't you? Only healthy's not the word. What you really mean is that you're so superior a person that your feelings are finer than other people's. I wish you'd snap out of it. Who do you think you are?' She shut her mouth with a resentful snap. Then she got up from her chair and came to kneel in front of mine. She put her arms round my waist and her cheek against my arm. 'Being miserable doesn't solve anything, not if you make a virtue of it.'

'I'm sorry.'

I felt her stiffen. 'I don't want you to be sorry,' she said in a muffled voice. 'I want you to *see*. You want to punish yourself because you haven't lived up to some impossibly grand image. . . . But you only hurt yourself and that's pointless, it doesn't put anything right. Not for you or for anyone else.'

'Does anything?'

'I don't know.' She sat back on her heels and looked at me, pink-cheeked and with a curious shyness. 'Unless it's just going on trying, within one's limits. Not getting angry because there are limits, or sitting in a swamp of misery. Accepting that things aren't perfect but believing they can get better and doing something about it, if you can. Being hopeful. . . .'

'All right, Mother,' I said.

She looked at me with genuine fear. 'Don't laugh at me,' she said.

'I'm not. I said, all right. It's all right.' I got hold of her awkwardly and held her tight. 'Only don't leave me alone, that's all.'

'I won't,' she said. 'I won't, darling.' She hung onto me tightly. 'It'll be marvellous going to Africa with you,' she said.

Reggie came with us to the airport, largely to sustain Julia. Railway stations, quay sides and airports always brought her to a quivering pitch of emotion. When our flight number was called, her tears welled to the surface like a spring and she turned to Louise, whom she had snapped at throughout the car journey, and clung to her.

Reggie, standing manfully apart from this scene, shook hands with me ceremonially. He nodded at Philip who was to fly out with us for the summer holidays and return – his own wish – for the autumn term. He was sitting on a bench, smiling back sweetly whenever anyone smiled at him and clutching the new cricket bat Georgiana had given him and an enormous bag of sweets. From time to time he popped one in his mouth and sucked reflectively. He looked sleepy and replete.

Reggie said, 'I hope he's not sick all over you.' He looked pensive. 'Poor little beggar. Living in two worlds. He won't know where he belongs, will he?'

'You don't have to be sorry for him. He'll be one of the New Men. Hopping round the world the way you and I caught a country bus. He'll belong everywhere.'

'I suppose so. Won't even stand out, I daresay. Everyone'll be coffee-coloured by then. Coffee-coloured and classless. Only not in my time, thank God.' He gave a loud laugh. 'You can't help how you feel, you know, you can only admit it might be wrong, sometimes. Give my regards to Mr Nbola. Tell him Rootes are bringing out a new station wagon this autumn that he might like to have a look at.' He glanced at Louise who was gently disengaging herself from her mother and collecting her hand luggage. 'Women are funny,' he said, and then, as this remark raised up a disturbing echo, looked at me shamefaced. 'You never asked her about that – that business?'

‘No.’

‘I was sorry about it.’ His face was red with effort. ‘Oh – she put me through the hoop. Then, and afterwards, when I told her I’d told you. I’ll never understand what she thought she was up to.’

‘Me, neither,’ I said, to comfort him.

*

The Dutchman said, ‘But there is no colour bar in French territories, surely?’

It was one of those planes with facing seats. The Dutchman was sitting opposite us, but this was the first time I had heard him speak. He had my sympathy, though. The Englishman next to him, a big, tanned man with an Ancient Mariner eye, had been talking to him ever since we left London and though I had dozed on and off his voice had been a constant irritation, like a fly buzzing in a bedroom. Nearly at Rome now, we were fastening our seat belts and the Dutchman was beginning to look weary. He said, with faint desperation, ‘So the hotelier could not properly refuse to take in your African friends, could he?’

‘Ah,’ said the Englishman. ‘Not legally. Nor did he. He made it clear that he would have been happy to accommodate us all *if* he had had single rooms vacant. But there was only this dormitory free, you see, and he refused to let me share it with them. Of course, I argued the point.’

‘I am sure you did,’ the Dutchman said.

‘I said, what was he against? If it was blacks, then he had no business to be running this hotel. If it was homosexuality, then colour made no difference, for heaven’s sake! But, d’you know, I couldn’t budge him an inch!’

Beside me, Louise began to laugh. She laughed until she choked on the boiled sweet she was sucking.

I gave her my handkerchief, thumped her on the back and whispered 'For heaven's sake - it wasn't *that* funny.'

She blew her nose loudly. When she looked at me, her eyes were almost tearfully bright. 'Wasn't it?' Her lips twitched in a small, self-satisfied smile 'You don't understand,' she said.

I did, though.

We got out of the plane and walked across the tarmac. Philip dragged at my hand, rubbing one fist into his eyes. I said softly, 'Was it like that, with Reggie?'

She nodded. Her face looked drained and corpse-like under the blue, airport lights. 'Sort of. Oh - it sounds so silly, I couldn't tell you. I was hopping mad, actually. He said he hadn't liked the idea of Jay coming in the first place, for *my* sake. Black men, you know, so potent, so randy . . . I said if I was inclined that way, black lodger, white lodger - what was the difference? He went all pompous and red-faced and said there was a lot, but he didn't intend to discuss it. So I said there wasn't any difference, I *knew* I wanted to hammer it home. I felt such a fool, afterwards.'

'You deserved to.'

Her hair blew sideways across her face as she turned to look at me. 'You didn't believe him, did you?'

'Not for a minute, love,' I said.

*

The sun was shining in Nairobi, beating down on the flat, tawny plain with a clear, dry heat. Philip ran ahead of us, his school cap crushed in his pocket, his grey socks dangling round his thin ankles. His arms wobbled like a small windmill

in a gale. I saw Jay with Agnes beside him, waving from the low airport roof. She was wearing a green dress; their faces were split open in welcome. 'There they are,' I said, to Louise. She put her hand under my arm and we advanced towards the building, waving and smiling too.

Then Jay stopped waving. I saw him turn and speak to Agnes.

Louise's hand tightened on my elbow. 'I wonder what he's saying,' she said.

'Probably, "My God, they do look white",' I said, and laughed.